



Reborn to Master the Blade:

From **Hero-King**
to Extraordinary
Squire ♀

2

Author: Hayaken
Illustrator: Nagu



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The background of the cover is a full-page illustration of a young woman with long, flowing white hair and striking red eyes. She is wearing a vibrant red, sleeveless dress with a high collar and a large, ornate gold-colored belt buckle. She is holding a long, slender sword diagonally across her body, with the hilt featuring a decorative gold-colored guard. The background shows a soft-focus landscape with green grass, trees, and a distant building under a blue sky with light clouds.

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Chapter I: Inglis, Age 15—The Chiral Knights' Academy (1)

The day of the Chiral Knights' Academy entrance ceremony had arrived at last.

An attractive young blond man, slightly older than Rafael and wearing a grandiose outfit with a flowing cape, delivered a rousing speech to the assembled incoming students. This was Rafael's commander, Prince Wayne.

"And with Highland supplying Flygears, both the operational deployment and the tactical application of knights will be revolutionized. Your class will be at the forefront—pioneers in a new era of warfare!"

The female students stood transfixed by his dashing figure, but Prince Wayne had more going for him than just his looks. As the man who'd suggested airlifting the frozen Prismer, his mind was surely as impressive as his body.

The knights' academy offered a three-year training program, with exceptionally promising cadets allowed to skip years. The majority of students were young aristocrats or relatives of knights. There was the occasional gifted commoner, most of whom were blessed with a particularly valued Rune that had attracted some sort of patronage. And Inglis had heard rumors of a few exchange students in her class.

Rafinha sighed. "Ahh, Price Wayne's so dreamy..."

"C'mon, Rani. You're here to study. Stay focused," Inglis scolded.

"Can't a girl at least dream?"

"Nope. You're way too young for that anyway. Not happening."

"Okay, *Mom*. You know, Chris, you don't get on my nerves very often, but..."

Leone tried to defuse the tension. "Now, now. He definitely is quite the specimen. Don't you think so, Inglis?"

"Not really."

"So who *do* you prefer, then?"

"Umm..." *Well, that's an awkward question when I'm not even interested in men.* "Probably that Prismer from before. It seemed pretty strong."

"Why, it's not even human! I don't understand how you can be so beautiful and yet not have any interest in romance."

"Yet here I am, having exactly none."

“What a waste! If I looked like you, I’d have more boyfriends than I could keep track of!”

Rafinha piled on. “Aha ha ha, I can see a ton of guys asking for Inglis’s hand! She acts so grown up, after all.”

“No, no, no! Why are you even going there, Rani?!”

“You really do act like you’re my mother sometimes.”

As the trio bickered among themselves, Prince Wayne finished his speech. “...And of course, there are also times when squires must take the lead.”

Now the teacher acting as master of ceremonies took the stage. “His Royal Highness will now present the academy emblem to each student! Please walk to the podium as your name is called.”

Prince Wayne had a few words for each student as they received their emblem, and their eyes tended to sparkle at the honor. It seemed he was a natural leader to boot.

“Rafinha Bilford!”

Rafinha made her way to the podium as her name was called. It was well-known that she was the sister of the holy knight Rafael, and the assembly buzzed with excitement as she passed by.

“So she’s Rafael’s little sister? She’s cute.”

“And she has an upper-class Rune too, right? What a family.”

“If I make friends with her, I might get to meet Rafael!”

Prince Wayne watched as she approached, and spoke as she arrived. “Hey. So you’re Rafael’s sister? You look just like him. He’s definitely a man I’m glad to have at my side.”

“A-And I’m sure he’s equally glad to have a commander like you.”

“A sister of Rafael’s is a sister of mine. If you’re ever in any trouble, just ask. I’ll do whatever I can.”

“Thank you.”

“It seems the other students also know your family—don’t let the pressure hold you back. I’m sure that’s what Rafael would want as well.”

“Of course!”

Next to walk the stage...

“Inglis Eucus!”

Inglis’s walk produced its own distinctly flavored buzz.

“Wow, I’ve never seen anyone so beautiful.”

“She is. But she doesn’t have a Rune. Is she a squire, then?”

“With looks like that, she’d have no problem living a comfortable life. I wonder why she chose to enlist instead?”

Inglis curtsied as she arrived before Prince Wayne.

“And you must be Rafinha’s cousin.”

“Yes, sir.”

“A strong squire corps is the future of warfare. Even if you don’t

have a Rune, your exploits will open the path for others. In many ways, the future is in your hands. Stand tall. And take good care of Rafinha. We both know day-to-day leadership comes from the ranks, right?”

It was clear that even Inglis, as someone without a Rune, would be held to a high standard; it was fairly typical for nobles to send trusted commoners to be trained as squires—especially now, as Flygear pilots.

“Of course. I’ll do my utmost.”

Some time passed after Inglis’s entrance as other students walked across the stage. Then came the call:

“Leone Olfa!”

Another buzz of yet another kind.

“Hey, wait a minute. Olfa, like—?”

“That traitor Leon’s sister?!”

“I can’t believe she’d show her face here!”

As Leone walked over, Prince Wayne spoke to her. “I’m sorry, Leone. We are, in part, responsible for the voices you hear now, unable to give word to the misdeeds of a Highlander.”

“No, if anyone must apologize, it is myself. I swear, one day I will capture my brother and restore honor to the Olfa name.”

“Well, you’re not Leon. You’re *you*. I believe in you, and I know a bright future awaits. Press forth! Ignore the murmurs of doubt!”

“I will...!”

Soon, the entrance ceremony was over, and orientation began. Eventually, the students would be divided between squires and knights, but for now they were all gathered in one mass on the fields of the academy. There stood a massive stone sparring ring—and within it a young woman stood, her back straight, grasping an Artifact in the form of a staff. She was attractive, with flaxen hair and wearing a long, flowing robe with cute decorations. Glasses with small, round lenses and a perpetual grin completed her look.

“Good afternoon, everyone! I’m your principal, Miriela. I’m so happy to meet you all.”

Miriela had, for some reason, not been at the podium during the entrance ceremony. She seemed young for her role, and she gave off a relaxed and casual demeanor. But from her hand glimmered a special-class Rune, proof that she was a holy knight—and that she was far more than she let on.

She beamed down at the students. “Let’s skip the formalities and get right down to orientation, shall we? First, I’ll explain what you’ll be studying here. How about a quick warm-up? Everyone, come riiight into the ring! Oh, but you budding young knights with an Artifact, be sure to leave those behind.”

“...I’m down for this. Sounds fun.” Inglis leaped into the ring, and

Thump!

“Wha—?!” Her body felt like it was made of lead, and she unexpectedly stumbled as she landed.

“Ngh... So heavy...”

“I can’t stand...”

“I can’t even move!”

As she looked around, she saw her fellow students crumple to their knees, unable to move.

“And that’s a gravity field created by my Artifact. It’s how we conduct training at the academy, so grin and bear it. I don’t want to see a single one of my kids fall on the battlefield, so I’m going to get you into tip-top shape.”



Most of the students were having second thoughts now—but not Inglis.

Just feeling the mana flowing around her to weigh her down was a wonderful sensation.

So this is the power of Miriela's artifact.

Figuring out how to apply that herself—to herself—would be like killing two birds with one stone: both physical training and mana manipulation training.

“This is amazing! I already love this school! I can’t wait to learn how to do that!” Inglis was already lost in daydreams about how, and where, the mana twisted around her.

“Eek! It’s so heavy!” Rafinha was still on two feet, but only barely.

“This’ll be tough without an Artifact...” Leone said, holding up a bit better. “But it’ll be a good challenge!”

Inglis nodded. “Yeah, I think this kind of training is a great idea.”

“But if we have to do this all the time, my thighs are going to get even bigger...” Leone seemed to have a bit of a complex about what training with a greatsword had done to her figure.

“All right! Here they come!” Miriela snapped her fingers, and humanoid figures rose up from a hole in the ring.

“Rock golems?” Inglis’s brow furrowed. *Is this part of her Artifact’s power? Or does she have another? I don’t know, but it must take a lot of power to create a giant like that. If she’s able to use two Artifacts’ Gifts at once, she’s definitely got a special-class Rune. I’d love to see what she’s capable of someday. Maybe I can see that now.*

“All right, class! It’s a game of tag, and these three rock golems are it! Anyone left in the ring after ten minutes gets free meals in the cafeteria for a month! ♪ Do your best, and don’t get caught!”

That was a mouthwatering announcement indeed.

“Oooh! That’ll be great to have!”

“I can’t let myself get caught! But it’s so heavy...”

To Inglis and Rafinha, with their voracious appetites, the prize was worth even more.

“Don’t worry, Rani. There’s only three, so...”

So, you can’t get caught by a golem if you’ve turned it into gravel.

“Aaaaaand...go!” Principal Miriela announced.

“Haaaah!” As soon as the time began, Inglis launched into a high kick at the nearest golem. The impact sent it sprawling back out of the ring, where it shattered.

“Hmm?!” The principal gasped in surprise.

“Yaaah! Gotcha!” A punch, then a throw, sent the other two golems following.

Inglis's body may have been weighed down, but that didn't mean she was helpless.

If anything, it was just the amount of weight she wanted to train under. "All right!"

A whole month of eating whatever I want without worrying about the price!

Rafinha grinned. "You did it! Now it's all-we-can-eat for a month!"

Leone nodded. "Amazing, Inglis! Though I shouldn't be amazed."

While Rafinha and Leone celebrated, the other students looked on, awestruck.

"Umm..."

"If no one's left to be it..."

"Then we're all safe? All right!"

"We eat free for a month!"

The thought of free food for each and every student for a month sent a cold sweat down Miriela's back. She nervously stammered out an excuse. "And yes, of course, if all three golems are thrown from the ring, you're safe! Thank you for the demonstration."

"But, Principal! That's no fair..." Inglis groaned.

"Sorry, sorry! I made a mistake! Let's try this one more time!"

I guess I shouldn't be surprised that she's so shocked. Just have to take 'em down again. And it is good training.

"Hmmmm... That's funny, I must have slipped up somewhere... But that *never* happens, right?" Miriela shook her head as she talked to herself, then raised the golems again. "Now, for real this time... Go!"

"Haaaah!"

Thud! Thud! Thud!

Three palm strikes, three downed golems.

Principal Miriela, momentarily speechless, forced a grin. "Hee hee hee! Oh my! Of course, that was still just a demonstration. We need to go over the important part at least twice, right?"

"But, Principal! That's really no—"

"Shhhh!" Miriela rushed up to Inglis, and whispered to her furtively. "Listen, we can negotiate. Three months for you, as long as you don't really give 'em the boot until the end. I'll even overlook it if you happen to maneuver out of bounds for a second."

"A month for three people each, and it's a deal."

"I knew we could come to an agreement!"

"Oh, but could you make the load on me heavier?" A further reduction of maneuverability would be even better training for Inglis.

"Err... Well..." Miriela paused hesitantly. "I kind of cast it on

everyone, so I can't really adjust it on a person by person basis. If you really want that, you can stay after class for extra lessons, but..."

"I'd love to."

Miriela paused again before confirming. "How about two months for three, then?"

"Got it."

They had reached a deal. And getting a good close look at the mana causing this enhanced gravity just might let Inglis use it herself. That, she resolved, would be her first goal at the academy.

"Okay, this time for real!"

Three more rock golems sprang up, chasing the students around the ring. Slowed by the gravity, they were thrown out of the ring, one by one. Time seemed to pass in a flash.

"Only ninety seconds left! The six of you still in the ring, do your best!" Miriela cheered her students on.

Of the six remaining, three were Inglis, Rafinha, and Leone. The rock golems were completely ignoring Inglis, and she in turn only watched the melee unfold around her, paying close attention to the other three students. Two seemed to be future knights, and the third here to train as a squire—an unexpectedly good performance from the squires, altogether.

Her attention first shifted to the two who had paired up, a boy squire and a girl knight.

"C'mon, Pullum! You may be slow, but you can hide behind me!" the boy said.

"Okay, Lahti. But will you be all right? Your legs are trembling."

"Don't worry about that. I'll be fine."

"H-H-H-Here it comes! Go over there!"

"Ahh! Don't shove me! You keep getting in the way..."

"Tee hee, sorry..."

The knight—Pullum—and the squire—Lahti—certainly made quite a scene, but the shove was enough to get him out of the way of the golem's swing.

Pullum, huh. I bet she knows exactly what she's doing there. There's definitely more to her than she lets on.

"Come then, golems! I, Liselotte Arcia, shall not fall as easily as you hope!" came the voice of a trainee knight; she was an aristocrat even in her speech. Her wavy blonde hair certainly looked the part of a proper young lady. She was good-looking but seemed somewhat unapproachable.

Up until now, she'd been surrounded by a guard of students—attendants, maybe—but they'd already been knocked out. Inglis had at first wondered whether Liselotte was capable of much on her own, but she did seem to be competent, standing at the edge of the ring and

waiting for her chance to knock out a golem.

More than just a famous name, then, Inglis thought.

“Sixty seconds left! This is the final stretch! Oh, and I’m turning the gravity up!”

Inglis could almost hear the *thunk* of another weight being added.

“Ahh, that feels great!”

Inglis may have been happy, but Rafinha let out a groan of dismay. “I can’t do this anymore...”

“Ugh... I can’t move...”

If Rafinha and Leone had had their Artifacts, things may have turned out differently, but the increased gravity was too much for them to bear.

“Eeek!”

“Whoa!”

They were each caught by a golem and flung from the ring.

“And we’re down to the final four!”

Gravity also took its toll on the other three with Inglis, and they were caught one by one.

“Guhhh...” Lahti groaned.

“Are you okay, Lahti? Eeeeeek!” Pullum screeched.

“This weight... It’s killing me... Help...”

The only salvation for Lahti was being pulled out from under Pullum as the golems cast them from the ring.

“Accursed beasts! Lay not a finger on me!” Liselotte struggled but was helpless once caught.

“And we’re down to one!”

That one being Inglis.

The crowd murmured, all eyes on Inglis. “Huh, there’s that cadet.”

“I figured she’d be the last.”

“So maybe the principal *didn’t* make a mistake earlier...”

But what they noticed most was something else about her.

“She’s beautiful!” they all exclaimed. Boys and girls alike were entranced.

Objectively, Inglis understood the reaction. Pleasing Rafinha and her close friends was fine, and she still enjoyed looking at herself in a mirror. But being the center of public attention wasn’t her thing. Even in her past life, the adulation of her retainers and subjects had been a different kind of gaze at least.

It was time to finish this—and when she looked over at Miriela, she received a nod.

Go time, then.

Inglis stepped forward, directly between the three golems, and they fell on her as one. “Hah!” She leaped straight into the air to avoid their charge, easily over the golems’ heads, even through the

increased gravity that kept her classmates from even standing. It was a heavy weight but one that felt almost reassuring. The golems crashed together and began to struggle against each other with sight of their target lost. And then Inglis dropped back in.

“This is over!” Her supple legs arced forth, sending all three golems flying in one blow. Almost unbelievably, they went flying far, far away. After all, it wouldn’t do to drop them on the watching students who gasped in awe.

“T-Time’s up! The meal ticket goes to Inglis! Now, next up is a test flight in a Flygear! Everyone, get ready to go to the Flygear dock!”

Clap-clap-clap!

Cheers and applause washed over Inglis as she stood alone in the ring. And as she did, Miriela rushed to her side.

“Now, Principal Miriela. About before—”

“Of course I’m still up for it. Just drop by my office anytime. But Inglis, are you sure you’re not a hial menace or something?”

“That would be absurd.”

“Aha ha ha, it would, wouldn’t it? You don’t really seem like one. Hmm, fascinating! There’s so much I’d love to discuss with you.” The principal’s eyes glimmered as she stared at Inglis.

“Ah, of course...”

Something seemed a bit strange here, but all Inglis could do was nod.



Soon after...

“All right, class! Now let’s go to the Flygear dock off campus! It’s kind of what you’d call the highlight of the academy, so pay close attention!”

As Principal Miriela spoke, seemingly timed deliberately, patches of a large shadow appeared around the class, accompanied by a low throbbing hum; it was a Flygear Port. Its winged hull was dotted with ten or so bays for Flygears to dock, which could in turn provide it with additional lift and thrust. Each Flygear could carry three or four people, making the full complement of a Flygear Port thirty to forty. Essentially, it was a Flygear mothership. Currently, each of the Flygears held one flight instructor.

“Climb aboard!” Miriela said. “It’s a bit of a hike, so we’ll be taking these.”

The students clambered aboard the Flygear Port, many enthused for their first flight aboard something that was still in limited deployment on a nationwide basis. Inglis had recently taken a Flygear

Port to the capital, so this would be her second flight, making her nearly as excited as they were. She loved flying. She loved the sensation as well as the novelty of something that would have been considered unthinkable in her past life.

“Ahh, the breeze feels so good! I love flying!” Rafinha was enjoying herself as well. Inglis shot her a grin.

“Currently, the Flygear Port forms the backbone of the surface’s airpower, since the Highlanders still haven’t parted with any of their flying battleships,” Miriela explained.

“Do you think we’ll be able to acquire any of those at some point?” Leone asked.

“Well, we’d sure like to, but it’s not going to be easy. We had to go through long, drawn-out negotiations to get just these Flygears and Flygear Ports. So it’s best to perfect our use of these rather than holding out hope.”

The Highlanders would be in no hurry to supply weapons that surface dwellers could use against them. Each armament or piece of support equipment would no doubt be subject to a thorough export review.

The Flygear Port carrying the students proceeded across the skies over the capital toward a large nearby lake. Lake Bolt, connected by navigable rivers to the sea, was home to a sprawling harbor district—and this access to both shipping and abundant fisheries had played no small part in where the capital was located.

“Oh, and remember the way here from the academy! We’re flying you out today, but for most of your training, you’ll be moving by foot!”

Surprised moans of “But it’s so far!” arose from the students as the Flygear Port glided down to a level part of the shore a distance from the harbor, set aside to limit the potential damage from accidents during Flygear training. A cadet who fell from their Flygear would also be far safer diving into the lake than if they’d lost control over solid ground. Since the academy had been a longstanding institution well before the introduction of Flygears, its distance from a suitable airstrip was inevitable.

Stepping into the cavernous hangar, the students found a Flygear Port, fully loaded with Flygears waiting for them.

“Wooow! This is amazing!”

“Ahh, it’s so exciting!”

“Wow. The capital really does have everything.”

Miriela’s voice projected over the awestruck new students. “A Flygear can hold three or four people. So grouuup up into threes and fours and try them out! First, pull the ignition lever underneath the control column, and detach the Flygear from the Flygear Port!”

Inglis, Rafinha, and Leone grouped up and headed for a Flygear. With a quick pull of the ignition lever, the Flygear's engines sprung to life with a satisfying purr.

"Don't touch the controls yet. Just puuush the Flygear onto the runway! They float a little when they're idling, so it should be easy!" The principal's description held true—the Flygear, once started up and detached, hovered, swaying slightly off the ground.

Inglis contemplated the device before her. "It really doesn't take much, does it?"

"I love how it's so floaty!" added Rafinha.

Leone nodded. "It really is."

They pushed it out onto the runway as they conversed.

"Once you're outside, climb on!" Miriela continued.

That meant they were cleared for taxi. Inglis was first aboard. "All right! Wow, it's a lot bumpier than the Flygear Port."

Rafinha followed her. "Huh, you're right."

"The Flygear Port's a lot bigger, so it's more stable, I guess," Leone said.

The other groups seemed to be just as enthusiastic to get aboard.

"All right, everyone! Let's take it easy at first, okay? One of you on each Flygear, grip the control column. Everyone else, hold on tightly to the rails!"

Inglis looked over at Rafinha and Leone. "Can I go first?"

"Sure, Chris. You're the squire, after all."

"Do your best, Inglis!"

"Okay. Thanks!"

Inglis gripped the yoke, the same excitement running down her spine as it did just before a fight.

"Slowly ascend, and head out over the lake. If you're unsure of the controls, there are reminders on the panel, so pay clooose attention! To get started, pull the yoke toward you while accelerating. The accelerator pedal is on the right, below the yoke."

Inglis looked down at the panel, its markings confirming Miriela's instructions.

While familiarizing herself with the controls, she slowly drifted the Flygear out over the water.

"Ahh! I can do this!" It was exhilarating, almost like the first time she'd ridden a horse.

Rafinha squealed in excitement. "This feels great!"

"You're right." Leone nodded. "The view's beautiful too."

She was right. Seeing the beautiful blue of the lake stretching out below was a thrilling sight.

Miriela continued her lecture. "Once you get used to it, you can try speeding up! But be light with the controls while steering. We

wouldn't want you to crash, now would we?"

Rafinha's eyes gleamed at the idea. "Chris, Chris! Let's see how fast this thing can go!"

"Huh?! A-Are you sure we're supposed to—" Leone wasn't quite sure it was a good idea, but Rafinha's enthusiasm had infected Inglis.

"Hold on tight, because here goes!" She stomped hard on the accelerator.

Vwoooooom!

The Flygear's engine roared as it rocketed off through the sky. The speed at which the terrain flew by below, the whistling wind pushing against her—it was unlike anything Inglis had ever experienced. She gasped. "Wow! This is pretty fast!"

Rafinha was grinning. "Even faster than I thought! Aha ha ha! ♪ This feels so good!"

Meanwhile, Leone protested, "Ahhh! I-Isn't this a bit too fast?! It's pretty scary..."

"But we're gonna be fighting magicite beasts with these, right? We'd better get used to it," Inglis reasoned.

Rafinha nodded. "Yep! It won't do us much good just reading about it!"

"You're probably right, buuut— W-Wait!" Leone stammered. "Wait! Turn! There's a merchant ship right in front of us!"

"It's fine, we've got plenty of room. I'll just turn a little bit and..." Inglis let off the accelerator for a moment while pulling the yoke to one side, but as she did the ship in front of them pitched sharply to one side. And not from poor construction or navigation—they could see a gigantic shadow rising from below it, pushing its keel to the surface.

"Whoa! It's gonna sink!" Rafinha yelled.

Inglis pondered aloud, "Wait, is there something below it?"

Leone gasped. "That's—"

A massive maw rose from the waves and bit a chunk off the side of the ship.

"A magicite beast?!"

The Prism Flow fell on lakes and seas as it did on dry land; the beasts dwelling in water were not immune to its effects.

Leone and Rafinha noticed it immediately.

"A fish magicite beast!"

"Oh no! It's gonna eat them!"

"Then it's up to us to save them! We're going in!" Inglis said.

"You're right! We're the closest ones here!" Rafinha nodded.

"G-Got it!" Even Leone was in full agreement.

Inglis held the throttle at full while descending to get in close, the Flygear whipping the surface of the lake around as she rushed toward the beast.

Rafinha clutched her bow. "All right! Let's see what I can do!"

"Okay, Rani!"

As they closed in on the ship, Rafinha leveled her favored Artifact bow and fired off a Shiny Flow. An arrow of light cut toward the beast—only for it to, as if it noticed the attack coming, dive back below the surface. Rafinha's arrow, unable to pierce the water, faded into nothingness.

Rafinha sighed. "Ahh, it ran away into the water!"

Inglis had a backup plan, though. "Leone, your sword can hit it down there!"

"Leave it to me!" Leone unsheathed her dark greatsword Artifact and pointed it low toward the water. "Give me speed!"

The blade tore through the surface of the lake, extending downward as it did, and soon hit the beast's shadow below the surface.

"A direct hit!" Leone cheered.

But no sooner had the words left her mouth than the Flygear rocked wildly as the beast's thrashing twisted the blade in her hands. "Ah! Ugh... It's so heavy..."

Inglis looked back. "I'll help out. Rani, take the stick."

"Okay, Chris!"

"Thank you, Inglis!"

"Leave it to me." Inglis wrapped her hands around the dark Artifact greatsword's grip alongside Leone's clenched grasp. "Here we go. One, two!"

"Lift!" With their strength combined, they pulled the sword upward to lift the beast from the water.

Splaaashhh!

The magicite beast was pulled to the surface, but the greatsword pulled free as well and swung high into the air.

"Ahh! It's getting away!" Leone cried.

"Don't worry!" Inglis nimbly leaped from the Flygear and began running across the surface of the lake—water walking. Her daily practice was paying off. *This isn't that hard as long as I step lightly*, she thought to herself.

"Whaaaaat?! You're running on water?! What in the world is going on here?!"

"Well, that's Chris for you."

With commentary from a shocked Leone and a proud Rafinha,

Inglis rushed across the surface of the lake to where the magicite beast was trying to dive back to safety.

“Haaah!”

A kick with all her might sent it aloft instead, and Inglis kicked again and again as it came back down. “Three! Four! Five hits!” Kick after kick propelled the beast to the shore. “Now someone finish it off!”

“Ah, okay...” Principal Miriela was shocked, but she finished the job nonetheless. Afterward, she turned to the group and said, “I feel like I should be terrified by what I just saw, but... Well done.”

“You’re right,” Inglis replied. “Fish magicite beasts are terrifying. You can never tell where they’re lurking.”

“That wasn’t quite what I meant, but... Such is life. I guess I’m lucky to have such star students. I’ll be sure to tell the others just how well you did.”

Inglis’s first day at the academy concluded with more Flygear training, followed by a campus tour after they returned. School life had left an excellent first impression. A lot of fun things were sure to be in store.

Chapter II: Inglis, Age 15—The Chiral Knights' Academy (2)

Gossip, giggles, and laughs.

The air was lively with the sounds of young women. Inglis felt a little guilty as she looked around—after all, everyone was naked. “I don’t even know where I should look,” she mumbled to herself quietly as she soaked in the hot water.

Many of the academy’s students were girls—perhaps 30 or 40 percent.

Right now, she was in the bath of the girls’ dorm. The academy’s baths were not quite as opulent as those in Nova’s manor, but they were still spacious and well-appointed. Unfortunately, they were also quite packed at this hour. Rafinha being there was fine—she was family, more like a granddaughter than anything—but the presence of other girls was annoyingly awkward; her eyes kept catching glimpses of things she felt like she shouldn’t have seen.

As Inglis pondered her predicament, Rin perked up from her cleavage and looked at her curiously.

“At least you look like you’re having fun, Rin,” Inglis said.

Rin burrowed back down before quietly looking around the room. The small magicite beast definitely enjoyed being doted over by girls, and she hadn’t taken to Rafael anywhere near as well as she had to Leone or Ripple. Maybe she was looking for a new friend.

Rafinha had, rather bluntly, come to the conclusion that as a human, Rin oddly preferred women and was simply driven by her instincts as a magicite beast with her reasoning weakened now. That would have been an awkward conversation if Rafinha was wrong, but Rin, unable to speak, could neither confirm nor deny.

Maybe they’d find out one day, if she could ever be turned back to Cyrene. If it could be done with aether, Inglis would have to figure out how. After all, the leader of the Steelbloods had said such a thing was impossible. Managing to do so would be proof she’d surpassed him in control of aether. Granted, Inglis had no way of knowing whether he’d been telling the truth.

Leone approached her. “What’s wrong, Inglis? Lonely without Rafinha here?” Her skin was flushed a pale pink from the heat of the bath, and it was obvious here that she was as well-endowed as Inglis.

Inglis had sometimes flirted with the idea of explaining to her that

Leone's rounded hips and soft legs, which the Olfa girl disliked, were actually things that men found more attractive, but the lack of any way to explain how she knew that meant it was better left unsaid. For now, she supposed she could appreciate the view.

"Eh, not really."

Another student had Rafinha's focus, and they were in a lively conversation. Of course, as the little sister of the holy knight Rafael, she drew attention. Like him, she was a cheerful, attentive person who could make good use of that spotlight. In other words, she was always up for a good chat, and thus the circle around her grew.

I'm glad she's already making new friends, Inglis thought. Normally, Inglis would happily watch over her, a bit protectively. But with only the other girls around, there were no threats here. Inglis didn't mind if Rafinha did what she wanted.

"Looks like she's pretty popular already... I'm a little jealous." Leone sighed, and Inglis could understand why. Their social situations right now were night and day, based entirely on reasons neither one was personally responsible for.

"It's okay, Leone. At least Rin's happy to see you." Rin was just about to hop from one chest to the other.

"Aha ha ha. She really does like hiding here, doesn't she?"

"Yeah."



“I wonder why she bounces back and forth between us, though. Is there a difference?”

“I’m not sure. It’s not like she can tell us.”

“Then I’ll get to the bottom of this mystery!” Rafinha suddenly poked her head between the two.

“Whoa?! R-Rani... Eek! C’mon, don’t!” Inglis squealed.

“When did you— Wait! Where are you—” Leone protested.

With an arm around each of them, Rafinha squeezed firmly before announcing her verdict with a sigh. “Chris, yours are springy and soft. Leone, yours are nice and perky. I wish mine were that big...”

“L-Let go!” Inglis protested.

Leone did the same. “I-Isn’t that enough?”

“Hmm? All right, why don’t we go get dessert after our bath? The cafeteria here at the academy stays open pretty late.”

Inglis squirmed. “That sounds wonderful! Now let go of me.”

Leone was surprised. “Dessert again? Didn’t you already have a ton after dinner?”

Rafinha grinned. “We’ve got plenty of room for more. And it’s free, right? Wouldn’t want to let any go to waste.”

Leone frowned. “I... I don’t think I could eat another bite. I’ll probably just head back to my room. If I overeat, I’ll get fat...”

After they all finished in the bath, Inglis and Rafinha enjoyed a second dessert at the cafeteria alone before heading back to their room. On their way, they were stopped by a commotion in the hallway on the east side of the third floor, where their room was.

“And thus, this room is *entirely* unsuitable for one of my stature! To imagine that you’d expect me to share accommodations with the flesh and blood of a traitor... Are you simply asking me to endure a situation where I may be murdered in my sleep? Why in the world would you admit someone like that in the first place?!”

“Well... We checked her out, and there was nothing suspicious about her...”

A blonde girl was arguing fervently with Principal Miriela. “I cannot possibly have faith in that decision!”

Inglis realized the girl was Liselotte, one of the students who had put up the best fight under high gravity against the golems. Looking at Liselotte’s hand, Inglis saw an upper-class Rune. No one in their class possessed a special-class Rune, so that meant Liselotte was one of the strongest here, apart from Inglis herself.

Liselotte seemed to have a problem with Leone, who was slumped gloomily nearby. The girls’ dorms were set up as two people to a room. Inglis and Rafinha had been placed together—as, apparently, had Leone and Liselotte. The latter pair seemed far less happy with

the arrangements.

“At the very least, you could permit me to change my room! I don’t know how I could go on otherwise.”

The principal sighed. “If you must. Ahhh...” She turned to the gathered crowd. “Would anyone like to volunteer to trade room assignments?”

Every person there either shook their head or shrank back, trying to avoid eye contact; no one wanted Leone for a roommate. News had already spread that she was the sister of the disgraced holy knight, Leon.

“Me! I’ll do it!” Rafinha raised her hand.

Inglis had expected this from her. The willingness to do what was right, no matter what the crowd around them thought, was a trait Rafinha and Rafael shared strongly. It was the best thing about both of them.

“You’re all so terrible! Leone’s been out there fighting magicite beasts in Ahlemin all alone! You should be thanking her! There’s no way she’s as bad as you think!”

Inglis whispered, “Rani, I understand how you feel, but calm down.” Rafinha seemed so angry she was ready to snap at her fellow students.

Inglis placed a hand on her shoulder to calm her down. *I know it’s frustrating, but they need to see it to believe it.*

“We’re fine with three in a room! Right, Chris?”

“Yeah, that works for me. Let’s go, Leone.” Inglis took Leone’s hand and led her toward their room.

“I’m sorry I keep causing trouble for you.” That was about all Leone could struggle to say without breaking into tears.

Later, they went to Liselotte’s room to get Leone’s things.

Miriela, who had come to help, sighed. “I expected some of the students to be unhappy, but not this many nor this soon.”

“If you expected this would happen, why did you admit her?” Inglis asked.

“She was recommended by both Prince Wayne and Rafael. There’s something going on behind the scenes. Plus, she has an upper-class Rune. It’d be a shame to let that go to waste. And I feel she should be judged on her own merits.”

The two girls nodded in response to Miriela.

“Sorry, but can you take care of her for now? I’ll try and see if I can get you three a bigger room or something.”

“Of course!” Rafinha exclaimed.

Inglis agreed. “Will do.”

Once they returned to their room, it was time for them all, including Leone, to settle down for the night. Sometimes the best way

to forget troubles was to sleep them away.

"I'll take the floor, I guess," Leone remarked listlessly. The room had been set up with a bunk bed for two, and there was now an extra.

"It's fine. Come here. You can sleep next to me." Inglis patted a space beside her on the bottom bunk. It would be a little cramped, but it wouldn't be a big deal.

"Ah, me too, then!" Rafinha had decided for her own reasons to climb down from the top bunk, making the trio crammed into one bed like sardines. However, maybe just being there would help Leone after the day she'd had.

After a short while, Rafinha fell asleep. Leone whispered to Inglis, "She's a little loud..."

"She snores a bit when she's this tired. I'm used to it."

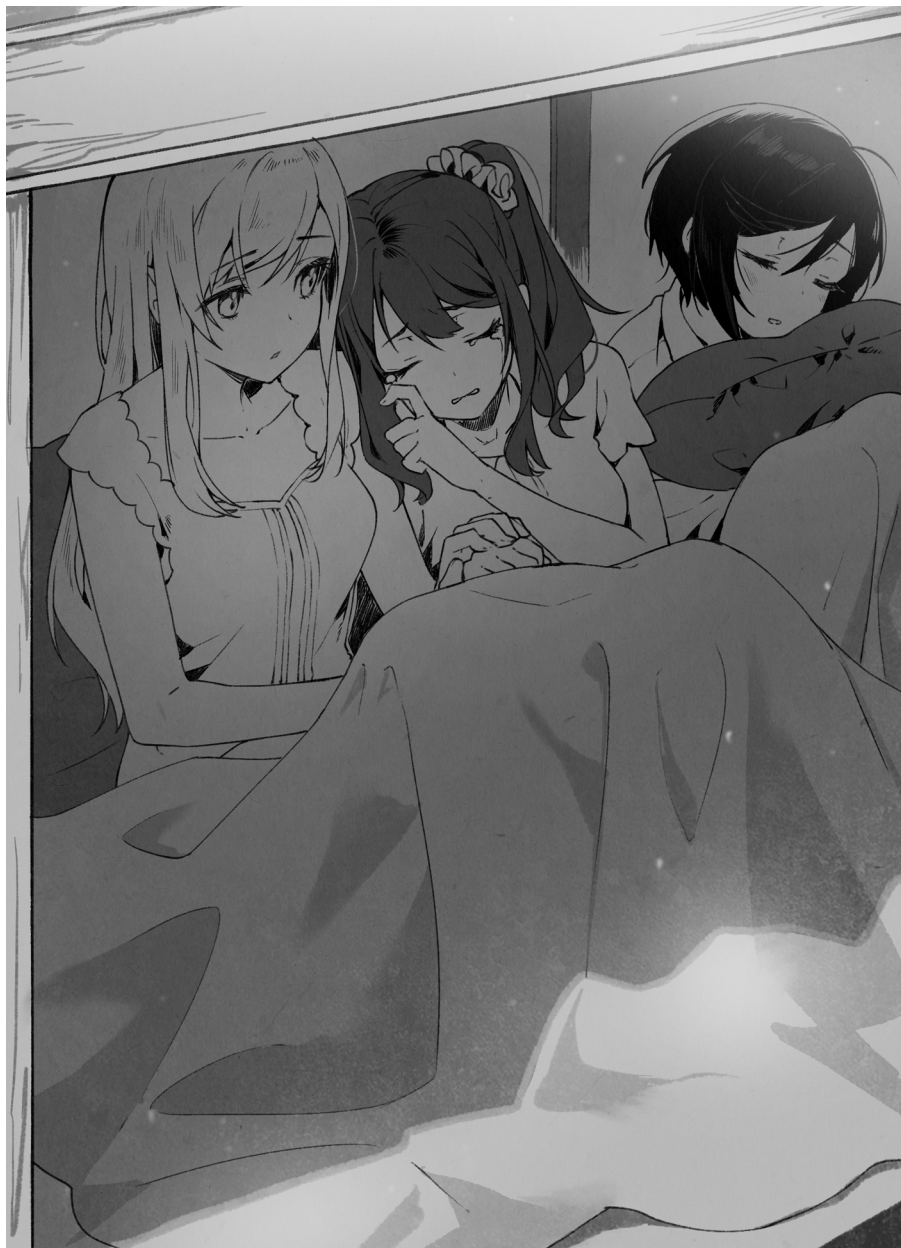
"It's been a long time since I've slept next to anyone, but I do feel a little calmer."

"You're not alone, Leone. We're here for you. Don't worry."

"Thanks, Inglis."

"Mm." Inglis quietly wrapped an arm around Leone, whose shoulders were still shaking from the stress, and let her eyes close. It reminded her of soothing Rafinha when she was scared of a ghost or had woken up from a nightmare. It felt like home.

And the three drifted off into their own dreams...





The next morning, Rafinha—in the knights’ course—and Inglis—in the squires’ course—had separate classes. Knights would be drilling with their Artifacts, while squires focused on Flygear piloting and maintenance. Lectures, overall combat exercises, and joint Flygear operations were shared.

Inglis’s class of freshman squires were gathered in front of the academy’s gate, listening to a burly bald man. His bulging muscles threatened to tear apart his teacher’s uniform.

“My name is Marquez, and as your instructor, I am responsible for you! Listen well: My mission is to train each one of you to become a squire! You may not have a Rune or an Artifact, but do not assume you are inferior because of that! You will face more than just magicite beasts. You must work hard to strengthen your body, your spirit, and your mind to compensate for your lack of a Rune! You will undergo training harsher than any knight, and we will accept nothing less than one hundred percent! Your first order: to the Flygear dock, on the double! Fall in!” Marquez set off at a brisk jog toward Lake Bolt.

“Huuuuuh?!”

“What do Flygears have to do with what he said?”

“He’s fast! We’re gonna lose sight of him!”

“Let’s get going!” The students hurriedly ran off after him.

“I guess I can get used to this,” Inglis muttered. If nothing else, Marquez was right. Physical training was key. But just running around everywhere was too simple. Inglis tried to recreate the gravity-increasing Artifact’s Gift she’d seen the day before. She remembered the flow of mana and how it was positioned, but it was delicate and complex. It would be hard to reproduce.

“Hmm...” Closing her eyes, she began to convert aether to mana and manipulate the mana as it wrapped around her. She didn’t have to do something advanced and make it an entire gravity field like the Gift was; she needed to apply it only to herself. She would be replicating just a part of it. So even though she didn’t have much practice with the technique—

Thunk!

She could feel her body being pulled toward the ground. Trying a quick hop, she could tell that she was heavier than normal. “Ooh! I did it!” How many times normal gravity was she under? She could tell it wasn’t much, but more practice would take care of that. And even a little bit would make her training significantly more effective.

“All right! Good enough for now.” Inglis finally took off, at the back of the pack. But even with the added gravity, even with the slow start, in no time at all she was nipping at Instructor Marquez’s heels.

“Ha ha ha! Don’t overdo it! No recruit is going to be able to keep up with me from the beginning, of course! If you lose sight of me, just knock on the door of a house and ask for directions to the— Whaaaaat?! When did you get here?!”

“Sir! Requesting permission to arrive early, sir!”

“That’s just fine, recruit! But do you even know the way there?”

Inglis paused to think. “Now that you mention it, I don’t really. So I’ll be following you for today.” She wasn’t completely satisfied with the idea, but she could at least try to increase the gravity while keeping pace.

Then she noticed someone else closing in from behind.

“Gahhh! Wait up!” A short young man with a stubborn expression on his face was doing his utmost to keep up with Inglis and Marquez. He was one of the standout students from yesterday—Lahti.

“Not bad,” Inglis commented.

Lahti didn’t have a Rune. He definitely wasn’t a divine knight like Inglis was. He had normal human legs. He was *fast*, no support needed, and Inglis and Marquez both grinned at the sight.

Lahti gasped for air as he ran. “Damn it, why are you smiling like that?! This is gonna kill me!”

“Ha ha ha! Looks like they brought me the good stuff this year!”

Two boys shouted at the people in front.

“Hey, don’t forget us!”

“Yeah! How’s anyone supposed to keep up with this?”

One of them had blue hair, and the other had red. Their hair colors were opposites, but their faces were like peas in a pod. Twins, maybe?

Inglis quickly remembered where she’d seen them. They’d been guarding Liselotte during her time in the ring. Her retainers, then. Middle-class Runes shone faintly on their hands. They could perhaps have been enrolled in the knights’ course, but it seems they’d chosen to train as squires for Liselotte instead. Inglis had seen others in her retinue with Runes, too, but all lower- or middle-class. And she’d heard Liselotte was the daughter of the king’s right-hand man, Chancellor Arcia. That meant she was the scion of a rising family. No doubt that fact drove this pair’s enthusiasm to be even squires.

Each of the boys carried an Artifact sword. The power of an Artifact enhanced its wielder’s physical capabilities, which explained how they could almost keep pace. She could feel the mana wafting off of them. Well, Marquez hadn’t said they *couldn’t* use Artifacts.

“Ugh... Damn it!” Lahti slowly began to fall behind.

“Hey, don’t push yourself, bro! Ain’t gonna surprise anyone if a pleb waddles in late!”

“He’s right. It’s not good to pretend you’re something you’re not.”

Liselotte’s retainers teased Lahti, the red-haired one openly and the blue-haired dripping with sarcastic condescension.

“Shut up!” Lahti yelled between heavy breaths. “You’re just acting big down here as squires because you couldn’t cut it as knights! There’s no way I’m gonna lose...to people who want to...take an easier road out...”

“Hey, you givin’ me shit?!”

“Hmph... Looks like your mouth runs faster than your legs.”

The blue-haired boy wasn’t, strictly speaking, wrong. Lahti was at his limit.

Inglis fell in beside Lahti and whispered in his ear. “Do you remember the way to the dock?”

“Yeah... Mostly...”

“C’mon, let me show you.” She took his hand and sped up, almost dragging him along. “Here we go!”

Lahti stammered. “Whoa! Too... Too fast! Guhhh...”

“Do your best. You don’t want to lose to them, right?”

Inglis heard shouts from behind as she ran. It was the instructor. “Wh-When you arrive, get out there in a Flygear and get some flying practice in!”

“Sir! Yes, sir!” She turned her head to smile back at the instructor before running even faster.

“She’s fast!”

“No way! What’s going on?!”

In the blink of an eye, Inglis had pulled away from Marquez and the twins.

Lahti wheezed, hunched over, as they arrived at the Flygear dock first. “Ugh... I feel like I’m gonna throw up...”

“Glad you didn’t lose, right?”

“It’s just because you dragged me along, not anything I did... That’s probably worse.”

“It’ll probably happen a lot, so get used to it.”

“Are you trying to pick a fight with me too?!”

“I’m down for it if you are.”

“Nah, I’d probably end up getting myself killed if we fought every time...” he said. “Anyway, thanks. I’m Lahti. Nice to meet you.”

“Inglis. Same here.”

“I’m not from here. I come from Alcard.”

Inglis thought, *Alcard—that’s the subarctic country that neighbors us, Karelia, to the north. It’s a harsh climate to scrape out a living in, but at least the dry weather means there isn’t much chance for the Prism Flow to*

fall, though there are still some threats from magicite beasts.

“Oh! So you’re an exchange student?”

“Yep. It’s nice to be able to take in the sun down here.”

“It is, yeah. Hey, is that Pullum girl from there too?”

“Hmm? Her? Yeah.”

“So you were probably sent here to learn to be her squire, right? I’m the same. I’m training to be Rafinha Bilford’s.”

“The holy knight’s sister, right? I guess we’re kinda like that, maybe.”

“Really?”

“But I really do want to get good at piloting a Flygear so I can be useful taking on magicite beasts! And there’s nowhere else I’m gonna learn that, so I deliberately tried to become an exchange student! All right, that’s enough of a break! I can’t stand waiting like this. Let’s get up there in Flygears!”

“Yeah. You’re right.”

Inglis and Lahti checked in with the flight instructors stationed at the dock, and took off in separate Flygear units before long.

“All right! We’re free until the others get here! Let’s take these things out for a spin!” As they pulled out over the lake, Lahti opened his throttle.

“Yeah!” Inglis followed. There was no sign of any magicite beasts today, so time to get some flying in!

“All right!”

“Wow! Pretty good!”

Lahti’s Flygear cut an arc through the sky, moving forward in turns that drew spirals without ever slowing down. His ascents, his rolls—they were all perfectly swift and precise. Inglis’s direct path paled in comparison. It seemed like he really was a born aviator.

“Heh heh heh! I’ve gotta have at least one thing I’m better at, or it would be no fair, right?” Lahti pulled just ahead of Inglis, matching her pace as he shouted back. With her throttle already wide open, there was no way she could catch up.

That got on her nerves a little bit. “Oh, I’ll catch you!” Inglis extended a hand backward and fired off an Aether Strike!

Whoosh!

The pale blue blast of energy tore up the surface of the lake behind her, but that wasn’t the point of her attack. Using the recoil of the blast, she sped up, pulling ahead of Lahti for a moment.

“Whoa?! What the heck was that, Inglis?!”

“I don’t like to lose either.”

“I’m not worried about that! I’m worried about the cannon-like

light you just pulled out of nowhere! You don't even have a Rune. How in the world...?"

"I've been practicing."

"That's not really what I'm concerned about!"

"Anyway, I've got you beat in speed."

"Sure, but how about handling?"

"You've got me there. I've never seen anyone fly like that. You have to teach me how."

"Sure thing."

As their race drew to a close, Marquez and the other students finally drifted into the Flygear port, and the group's flight lessons began. Even then, Lahti's talents were head and shoulders above the others to the surprised delight of Marquez.

And thus, the squires' separate training concluded for a time. The next day was lectures and joint combat training. So was the day after. However, that night, Miriela called for Inglis and her friends.

"What do you need, Principal Miriela?" Inglis asked after being admitted to the principal's office.

"Ah, Inglis, Rafinha, Leone. Remember when you protected that ship from a magicite beast while I was showing you the Flygear dock? Its owner was very impressed and would like to extend an invitation —"

"Wow! Is he treating us to dinner?" Rafinha's ears perked up.

"It appears so."

"Who is he, anyway?" Inglis asked.

"He appears to be the owner of the Rambach Company."

Inglis and Rafinha stifled their shocked gasps. That was a name they hadn't heard in a long time.

Rafinha whispered, "Chris, is that them? Rahl's—"

"Yeah. That's Rahl's father's company." *But Rahl had become a Highlander. Wouldn't his father have too? So why was the company still around?*

There was no way to find out but to accept the invitation.

Chapter III: Inglis, Age 15—The Chiral Knights' Academy (3)

Rattle, rattle, rattle...

The dry scraping of iron-shod wheels on stone echoed into their ears from outside as the carriage rolled along. Inglis was gazing out the window at the setting sun when Rafinha, sitting across from her, spoke up. "It's too bad Leone didn't come along."

Leone had declined their grateful offer with a simple "I'll pass, but you two have fun." And thus, today, Inglis and Rafinha set out alone after their lessons had concluded.

"I don't blame her," Inglis said. "It wouldn't surprise me if the Rambach Company holds a grudge against her."

Rahl's father had been the head of the Rambach Company. Inglis wasn't sure if that was still the case, but Leone's brother, Leon, had been the one to poison Rahl with Prism Powder, changing Rahl into a magicite beast. If Rahl's father knew about that, he would likely be upset to see Leone too.

"He might not be too happy to see us either—but I'm more worried about Leone. She seems really depressed lately."

"Yeah. I hate seeing her sad like this."

"But it's not like hanging around being gloomy will make her happy. If only we had some way to cheer her up..."

"I think she feels the same way but is pretty exhausted from everything that's going on. We should wait until she's ready."

Rafinha paused. "You're right. We can't drag her to her feet and expect her to be fine right away. I have an idea, though! Let's bring her back something tasty!"

"That's an excellent plan. Let's pick out something she'll love."

"Yeah!" Then Rafinha got quieter. "Hey, Chris, I've had something on my mind lately. Everyone's nice to me just because I'm Rafael's sister, right? But it's the opposite for Leone. Everyone hates her because she's Leon's sister. So that's why we need to be there for her. She's a good girl. You'll stand by her too, right?"

"Of course. That's admirable of you to think that way, Rani."

Inglis softly brushed Rafinha's silky dark hair. *Yes, I'm proud of how Rafinha maturely recognizes how others perceive her. She's acting on that rather than purely on her own desires.*

Rafinha giggled. "That's one worry off my mind, then."

"Really?"

"Yeah. One thing I've definitely learned is that if you're happy with my decision, I don't have to worry."

As they conversed, the carriage came to a halt.

"Are we there?" Rafinha asked.

"It doesn't look like it. We're just stopped in the middle of the road." When the carriage had arrived at the academy to pick them up, the coachman had said he would bring them directly to a mansion owned by the company.

"Pardon us, but we'll be inspecting this carriage!" A knight, his armor embossed with the royal emblem, opened the door to the carriage. "Hmm... Are you cadets from the knights' academy?"

Inglis politely tried to brush him off. "Yes, we are."

Rafinha, meanwhile, was curious. "Is something wrong?"

"Over the past few days, there have been several unexplained murders in the streets at night, so the city is under strict guard."

"What?!" Inglis blurted out.

Rafinha was similarly surprised. "Why, that's terrible."

Inglis and Rafinha had only just recently arrived in the capital, and the academy expected its students to live and mostly stay on campus, so they hadn't had much time to explore and find out what was going on in the city.

"Most of the victims have been knights with Runes. It's like we've got a Rune-Eater in our midst."

Inglis cupped her chin. "Any clues as to the culprit?"

The knight shook his head. "Not yet. The Steelbloods have been getting more powerful recently, and some think it's them—there will be another offering to the Highlanders soon. Maybe they're trying to interfere with that? Anyway, you two should be careful."

Inglis nodded. "Understood. Thank you."

"We will. Thanks for the warning."

The knight closed the carriage door and left. Once the carriage was rolling along again, Inglis said, "A Rune-Eater, huh? Sounds fun. I bet it's pretty tough."

"More like things are going to get pretty messy."

"Why's that?"

"Because anything that makes you smile like that turns into a mess. That's something *else* I've learned."

"Well, excuse me."

"Rafael would quickly do something, but he's not here..."

"Is he still busy airlifting the Prismers?"

"Yeah. He said he'd get in touch when he got back, and I haven't heard anything yet other than that Prince Wayne left to join him, plus

Eris as a bodyguard.”

“So we’re spread pretty thin here. But how do you know that?”

“Well, a lot of people like to talk with me, and some of them are family of royal knights.”

“I see.”

The carriage stopped again, and this time, the coachman announced their arrival. They had arrived at the mansion’s courtyard, exceptionally large even for this upper-class district. “Please feel free to make your entrance.”

“Of course.”

“Thank you.”

Inglis and Rafinha set off on foot across the carefully maintained courtyard. The light of sunset had faded to the gloom of dusk.

“Rani, hold on a second.”

“Huh? What’s up?”

“Just stay right there.” Inglis stepped forward alone.

Whoosh!

A volley of arrows cut through the air toward her.

“Chris?!”

“Mm. Don’t worry.” Inglis responded without hesitation. Too quickly to see, she caught each of the flying arrows between her fingers.

“Did— Did you get them all?”

“Yeah. I could tell something was up. So I guess they aren’t pleased to see us.”

“They’re ambushing us?!”

“Looks like it. But—”

Thwap! Thwap! Thwap!

Inglis suddenly flung the arrows between her fingers back.

“Whoa!”

“Oww!”

“What the—”

“She’s shooting back?!”

Inglis grinned, satisfied by the men’s shouts of pain and dismay echoing from the shadows around the trees. “Exactly the warm welcome I’d hoped for.”

Rafinha sighed. “Yeah, that’s the smile I was afraid of...”

“Pull it together, lads! It’s not tough if you read her movements. And as for you, missy...” A man with a scar on his cheek stepped forward, blocking Inglis’s path. From his hand, a middle-class Rune

glowed. "I'll take you on! Bring it!"

"I'd love to."

"Great! Show me what you've—gahhh?!" A quick elbow jab sent him staggering back into the outer wall of the mansion, where he collapsed, unconscious.

"All right, who's next?" Inglis flashed her toothiest grin. The remaining men, their morale broken, screamed in terror.

A young man stepped forth from the mansion's entrance and bowed to Inglis. "Please! Enough! You really are all you're cracked up to be! We're sorry! Go easy on us!"

"That's up to you, now, isn't it?" Inglis turned her focus, and her devilish delight, to him. "Though I think it would be more fun if you gave it a try too." Her appearance may have been all grace and beauty, but what lurked behind her words was obvious.

Panicking, the young man shook his head. "No thanks, I'm fine! I'm no better than him, so I think I'd fare just as poorly. We're no match for you."

"Ahhh, such humility."

"Humility? Hon, that's *honesty*. Sorry to disappoint."

"Oh, really? That's too bad."

"Sheesh, turns out your looks aren't the most startling thing about you... A-Anyway, sorry for testing you like that. I'm Fars Fargo, President of the Rambach Company."

"Oh, are you? I'm Inglis Eucus. Pleased to meet you."

"Honestly, this isn't the first time we've met. Same goes for the young lady Rafinha Bilford over there."

"Oh, you know us?" Inglis asked.

"Yeah. It has to have been, what, around a decade now? Remember when our company came to Ymir to train with the knights? I was there. You've grown up into quite the pair of beautiful young ladies. It's hard to believe it's been that long."

"Oh, right, now that I think about it..."

"Anyway, come inside. I've got a heck of a banquet ready. After all, I did invite you here to thank you."

"Oooh! ♪" Rafinha suddenly exclaimed. "I can't wait! I'm gonna eat all I can!"

"Rani, it's not ladylike to get so excited," Inglis cautioned.

"Ha ha ha. It's fine. C'mon in and stuff yourself," Fars said. He was smiling at first, but after an hour with them...

"Are you really eating that much?!" He mournfully stared at the towering stack of empty plates on the table.

"Mmmm! ♪ The food at the cafeteria's nice, but this is way fancier. It's so tasty. ♪"

"It's definitely more, and better, than we could afford on our

allowances, so let's eat up while we can!"

"Yeah. We should probably wrap up some to take home for Leone."

"You're right."

"Excuse me!" Rafinha called. "Could I get this wrapped up?"

"O-Of course. Hey, someone wrap it for her!" Fars commanded.

"Thanks!" Inglis and Rafinha thanked Fars with their cutest smiles—and then dug right back in.

"Wait, you're *still* eating?" He shook his head. "Whatever, it doesn't matter. You don't have to stop, but do you mind if I ask you something?"

"Wuh ibbih? (What is it?)"

"Huuh, gwuhheb. (Sure, go ahead.)"

Inglis and Rafinha made no attempt at table manners, their mouths full of steak.

Once everyone was ready, Fars caught them up to speed. "Like I explained, our company is in a tight spot right now. When the old boss, Rambach, and his son Rahl got Highland citizenship, they pretty much straight-up forgot about the company, and it's been just us holding things together since then. We heard about what happened to Rahl in Ymir, but that doesn't mean there's any bad blood between you and us. After all, they abandoned us too. And I guess they let their old beefs eat 'em up inside once they got to Highland. They weren't exactly great human beings to begin with, though—especially Rahl. Anyway, it really was only thanks to circumstance that you saved our ship not long ago. And if you were able to do that... Well, we could really use a hand with something else."

"Veh? Wiwah? (Yeah? With what?)" Inglis asked. At this point, her cheeks were stuffed with fried chicken as if she were a chipmunk.

"C'mon, don't talk with your mouth full, I'm trying to be serious here... Well, if you really want to, go ahead." Fars cleared his throat before continuing. "There's a lot of trade between the kingdom and Highland, and we've gotten in on it. But things have gotten messy lately, y'know? Plenty of rumors about how the Steelbloods are gonna come up with a way to sabotage it. The royals are putting on a big show of being on guard, but that's probably just to keep their own heads attached while they hang us out to dry. And that's why we need our own talented guards. Hell of a shame for 'armed merchants' to hire guards, but I ain't got much choice left. How about it? Interested in earning a bit more than the usual pay to protect us?"

Inglis and Rafinha continued munching as they glanced at each other.

"Fowih aythih haviz, wyetdahai laheelvuh? (So if anything

happens, we get to fight the Steelbloods)?”

“Vh, Chf, yurameut vah ughn? (Ugh, Chris, you’re on about that again?)”

“Yufiif foo lenvahuh? (You think it’s too dangerous?)”

“Ahvi. Ahvanih moah vehfi muhee, enh if mvhi feeah lyole oof. (I’m in. I wanted more spending money, and it might cheer Leone up.)”

“Yufahvih vai. Eynveh, wev wohn vwi faw fu vuh finfufbul avow if? (You’re probably right. Anyway, why don’t we talk to the principal about it?)”

Fars sighed deeply. “Yeah, yeah. Don’t mind me over here.”

Having gone over the situation with Rafinha, Inglis swallowed her food and then spoke clearly. “We’ll ask the principal for permission once we get back to the academy. If she approves, we’ll take you up on that.”

“Really? Thanks so much! That’ll be a great help!” Fars said.

“The pleasure’s all mine.” Inglis smiled in return. If anything did happen, it was quite likely she’d be up against a powerful foe, and that kind of opportunity didn’t come every day. Lessons at the academy were fine enough for what they were, but they didn’t beat actual battle experience. Inglis was honestly grateful for the opportunity to line her own pockets while being on the front lines.



After the dinner meeting, Inglis and Rafinha boarded the carriage to return to the academy. Inside, the girls passed the time through conversation.

“They said there was a killer on the loose, right? I wonder if we’ll run into him,” Inglis pondered aloud.

“Sheesh! That’s nothing to get excited about!” Rafinha yelled, incredulous. “I’m not gonna say a thing—you know trouble shows up when you call its name!”

“Eeek!”

“Ahhhhhhh!”

Just as Rafinha finished, shrieks came from somewhere off in the darkness.

“Ooh! It’s always nice to get some exercise after a good meal!” Swiftly, Inglis jumped out of the carriage.

“Ugh...!”

Rrrumble!

Just as Rafinha followed, the clock tower they were under began to break apart!

“Rani! Look out!” Inglis leaped up, shielding her from the falling bricks and debris. When she landed, she was carrying the entire top of the tower, bigger than herself, on her back. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah. Thanks, Chris.”

Rafinha may have been used to this sort of performance, but the coachman was astonished. “Amazing! And you don’t even have a Rune!”

“Wait here for a minute. I’m going to go check it out.” Inglis ran toward the screams—the same direction from which the tower had been knocked down.

Wait, that looked like some kind of beast formed from lightning! As Inglis turned a second, then a third corner...

There he was—a man wearing gauntlets with indigo spikes. He was facing a strange indistinct form, the glow from its many Runes piercing through its own shadows.

“Leon?!” His name left Inglis’s lips in surprise before she could stop herself.

Leon spun around with an astonished look on his face as he recognized her voice. It really was Leon. There was no mistaking him or his lightning beasts around him.

“Inglis, is that you?! Wow, you’ve gotten even prettier!”

“What are you doing here?!”

Leon had defected to the Steelbloods a few years earlier. Was this one of their plots? Fars believed they were possibly trying to hinder trade with Highland. Was a murder spree part of that?

But then there was the uncanny figure behind him—a monstrous form with Runes all over its body, wearing a silver mask to hide its face.

The knights patrolling the city had said that the killer hunted people with Runes. They had called it a Rune-Eater. If Inglis had to choose which of them was the killer, she would guess it’d be the figure. Judging from their positions, Inglis was confident that Leon had been fighting him.

“Explode!” Leon yelled, and the lightning beasts detonated with a thunderous roar and a blinding flash of light.

“Ugh...” Even Inglis was forced to close her eyes.

“See you around! This one’s all yours!” She heard his voice, but when she opened her eyes, Leon was gone.

He was as nimble as ever, but she couldn’t chase him. There was still the Rune-spangled monster to contend with.

“Who are you? Are you the killer who’s been hunting people with Runes?” she asked, getting a good look at the figure in front of her.

Usually, a person only had one Rune. Their mana flowed in a particular way, and the Rune that fit it best was inscribed on them. It was a system set up for modern people who couldn't sense or control mana themselves. Yet the man before her had so many, and she could feel the disparate ripples of mana emanating from him. It was like he had the Runes—and the mana—of many people at once.

As she counted the Runes, Inglis's lips twisted into a smirk without her even noticing. It seemed like she'd found her first satisfying fight in a while. "If you wouldn't mind, maybe you could attack me?"

"Don't...want. Lady doesn't...look...tasty..." It was a limp, faltering response, but a response all the same.

"That might be your opinion, but tons of people think I'm quite the catch."

"Not...interested. Want...mana..."

"Then how about this?" Inglis converted the aether swirling around her to mana.

"Ohhhhhh?" His tone suddenly changed to nearly rabid enthusiasm. "Giiiiiiive!" He stretched out his arms and leaped toward her.

"Come and take it..." Inglis beckoned to the monstrous man. "If you can, that is."

"Grrrrraaaaagh!" The monstrous man, slumped forward, let out a bestial cry as he rushed toward her.

He's fast! Maybe even as fast as a hial menace! But not too fast for me! Inglis slipped by every sudden punch, every kick, and every charge.

"Ohhhh!" As if becoming impatient with his misses, the Rune-covered figure's blows became more and more desperate.

"What's wrong? Show me what all those Runes can do!" Twirling around his uppercut, she smashed a palm into his side, sending him careening back through the fence of a nearby abandoned house and into a wall.

"Agh! Hee hee hee..."

That should have been a staggering blow, but the figure rose as if nothing had happened. *A tough one, then. Interesting.*

The Runes on the man's body began to shine brighter. A pair of ice blades extended from his hands. Inglis could almost hear the air sparkle around the ice.

He had finally used one of the Runes he'd picked up. Kicking off the ground again, the man flew toward her.

He's even faster now!

"So that's how it is!" Inglis gracefully danced through the twin-bladed hail of attacks aimed at her, but as she did, another Rune on

his body glowed, and he faded from sight, taking Inglis by surprise.

Whoosh! Whoosh! Whoosh!

Now invisible, he continued his assault. She could still sense him, still feel the breeze on her skin and hear him move, but it was getting harder to avoid his strikes. A lock of her hair glimmered like silver thread as, caught by his blade, it scattered to the wind.

“Not bad!”

If she kept dodging, she knew he would get a lucky shot in eventually. Inglis predicted where the next blow would fall and grabbed the invisible man’s wrists as he cut at her.

“What...the...”

She felt him sway. “You’ve still got more! Show me all the Runes you haven’t lit up! When am I ever going to have a chance like this again? Please?”

“Nghhhhh!” he grunted.

Inglis considered her wish an earnest, friendly one, but instead it terrified the killer nonetheless.

“Khhhhh!” he grunted again.

She felt him shudder as balls of fire, a hailstorm of ice, and stone spears appeared around her.

Dodge! Inglis let go of the man’s hands and prepared herself, but she suddenly felt something heavy on her shoulders. Something wrapping around her. “Hm...?”

It was her foe, who had dropped his invisibility as unnecessary. She had grabbed his wrists earlier to hold him in place, but he in turn had used their close proximity to pin her down.

Elemental projectiles surrounded her as if a whole array of wizards were focused on her. If he attacked her with them, he’d be hurt as well.

But he’s going through with it anyway?!

“You’re still...just a girl... Take this!” The flames, the ice, the stones all shot forth as he clung to Inglis to shield himself from his own attack. She was pinned down, unable to wriggle free.

At least, not like this.

“It’s rather rude to embrace a woman without asking.”

Inglis broke the increased gravity that she’d secretly put herself under earlier, and her body suddenly felt as light as air. Enhanced gravity was a very convenient way to get more out of her training; she’d learned to keep it applied to herself unless she had a specific reason not to. That skill had made coming to the academy already worth it.

“Haaah!” Forcefully throwing the man off of her, Inglis leaped

high, where there were no projectiles to threaten her. Kicking off the roof of the abandoned house, she looked down to get her bearings. The monstrous man she'd cast off was in the middle of his own barrage. Balls of fire, cold hail, and stone spears all rained upon him, but just before they connected, they disappeared, swallowed up by something. He didn't seem to be hurt at all.

Inglis voiced her observation aloud. "So you can absorb your own attacks?"

That was why he was unconcerned about being caught in the middle of it. Inglis supposed it was a good way to fight, so long as he could pull it off. It was almost like her and Rafinha's "Decoy Kaboom" plan, where she rushed into a crowd of foes only for Rafinha to bathe the battlefield in arrows of light.

"Hee hee hee..." The man followed Inglis to the rooftops, twin blades of ice growing from his hands again.

Is he going to disappear and close in again? With all the projectiles he can muster this time? I'll have my hands full just dodging. But I can do that too!

Inglis replicated the flow of mana she saw in front of her. She couldn't do so before, but now she had her hands free, so to speak. At the moment, she could maintain only one mana effect up at a time, but she was adept enough to do it while also keeping up one aether effect.

Clink!

Coming into being with a noise just like when the man had summoned his swords, a blade of ice appeared in Inglis's hand. "Yep. That did it." Now she could do more than dodge—she could parry. And it was fun to use a sword every once in a while. It wouldn't do to forget all her practice in favor of fighting with her fists all the time.

"This time for real. Show me everything you've got," she said.

The man faded into the shadows again, the mana flow around him becoming so complex that Inglis wasn't sure she'd be able to replicate them yet, but she could still hear footsteps. An invisible blade carved toward her. Inglis envisioned its path and raised her own blade in response.

Clink! Clink! Clink!

A melodic sound, the clash of ice on ice was an entirely different noise than steel on steel.

"Now..." the Rune-Eater growled. "Take this!" Once again, the hail of projectiles appeared, this time extending far above her head.

She wouldn't be able to leap out of this one.

"Predictable." Inglis continued her assault through the storm raging around her. Sometimes she dodged; sometimes she took shelter under her blade. Her dance was elegant, beautiful—not even her foe could peel his eyes away.



“O-Oh...?”

“You’ve stopped.” *Now to counterattack!* Inglis sped up her attacks, and an almost musical duet of ice blade on ice blade increased in intensity. Slowly, her foe began to shrink under the assault.

Chop!

Inglis’s sword struck home, severing the man’s right arm.

“Aaaaaaahhhh!” As his wail of pain echoed, his arm thudded to the ground, plainly visible now. Slowly, he came into view once more, writhing in pain.

Is it because he can’t focus, or is it because that Rune was on his arm that I chopped off? Inglis didn’t have much time to think before the man tumbled from the roof.

“Chris! Chris?! Are you over here?”

That was Rafinha’s voice. She must have made it to the alley below.

“Rani!” Inglis yelled back. “It’s dangerous! Get away from there!” By sheer bad luck, Rafinha was standing near where the man had fallen.

“Gaaaaah!” he grunted.

“Eek! What’s going on?! Is this the murderer?!” Rafinha cried.

“More! More mana! Give me moooooore!” Leaping to his feet, the man charged at Rafinha like a wounded beast.

“Back off!” Rafinha tried to raise her bow, but she was too slow.

At this rate—

“Think again! Haaaah!” There was nothing Inglis wouldn’t do to protect Rafinha. She formed her Aether Shell around herself at full power. Kicking off from the roof, she thrust herself between Rafinha and the man more quickly than either could see.

And her blade of ice exploded into a flash of blue light.

“Remember this: I don’t care what you try on me, but if you go after Rani, you’re dead.” Inglis’s clenched jaw relaxed only when she finished speaking. “Not that he’s around anymore to hear it.”

Behind her, Rafinha swayed, as relief washed away her fear. “Good point...”

At their feet fell the man’s corpse, cleaved cleanly in two from head to toe.

Chapter IV: Inglis, Age 15—The Chiral Knights' Academy (4)

“Whaaaat?! Inglis, you saw my brother?!”

After returning to the girls' dormitory at the academy, Inglis filled Leone in about having encountered Leon. Inglis and Rafinha both decided that they should be honest with Leone about it rather than avoid the subject. If nothing else, maybe knowing he'd been nearby would give her the drive she needed to get back on her feet. Whether that would end up being a good thing depended on her friends, the people closest to her.

“Wh-Where?! Tell me! I have to go find him!”

“Wait, Leone. I can tell you where he was, but he's already left,” Inglis said.

“But if I hurry up, I might be able to find him! I can't just sit here!”

“First of all, calm down, Leone!” Rafinha insisted. “There's a lot we have to talk about before we go anywhere. Rin, can you help us out?”

Rin leaped from Rafinha's shoulder toward Leone. Because the small creature found a certain something lacking in Rafinha, she tended to perch on the girl's shoulders or head instead.

Rin nestled in Leone's cleavage. “Eeek?!” Leone squealed. “Ah! Ahhh! Not there! Knock it off, Rin!”

That was enough to distract her. Inglis didn't necessarily appreciate Rin's burrowing when she was on the receiving end, but it sure was useful now.

“No, like this is fine. Now will you listen to us?” Inglis asked.

“What about this is fine?! Make her stop!”

Leone was at least listening, though, so Inglis began to explain the situation: She hadn't just encountered Leon, but she'd also fought a murderer. Fars from the Rambach Company had a work assignment for them. Plus, the Steelbloods were rumored to be targeting the next offerings to Highland. If Leon, who had turned traitor and joined them, was in the capital, that lent weight to those suspicions. His presence made sense if he was preparing for whatever sabotage was planned, and he would likely appear at the drop-off location.

“So if we take the Rambach Company up on their offer...”

“Exactly, Leone. We can all go together. You can catch your

brother if he shows up.”

She agreed with Inglis. “Well, from how you’ve described it, that does seem possible.”

“We’re about to ask for permission from the principal. Will you come with us?”

“Okay. Thanks, both of you. I think this will get me back on my brother’s trail!”

With that decided, the trio visited Principal Miriela and explained the situation.

“So that’s what happened. I see. Great job taking down the killer! I can’t help being impressed!” Miriela paused and bowed her head. “But I do regret letting my students end up in such a dangerous predicament. My sincerest apologies.”

“Don’t worry. It was a fun fight. I should be thanking you.”

“Ha ha ha, Chris, you’re incorrigible,” Rafinha said. “Principal, sooner or later, when we graduate, we’ll be the hunters and not the prey. We can handle it.”

“Well, that’s a relief to hear.”

Inglis turned back to the matter at hand. “Anyway, may we take the offer from Mr. Fars and the Rambach Company?”

“Please, Principal Miriela, can we?” Rafinha asked as well.

“I beg of you... I want to deal with Leon with my own hands...” Leone pleaded.

“Wait, wait! This is a different matter. The killer... Well, I can’t deny you fought whoever it is, but I can’t allow this.”

“What?!” Rafinha yelled in surprise. “So you won’t let us take the job?”

“I can’t believe it! But the Steelbloods will probably be there!” Leone protested in defiance.

“Well, I’m not completely forbidding your assistance,” Miriela explained. “The knights *have* asked us to lend our support in guarding the offering. Most of the regular Flygear forces are still busy airlifting the Prismer from Ahlemin, and most of your upperclassmen are along with them. Perhaps you could help patrol the area. Would that be sufficient?”

“So we’d just be watching from a distance?” Rafinha asked.

“To be honest, that sounds likely unless anything happens, but...” Inglis muttered.

“Then we wouldn’t be able to get involved quickly if anything happens! We need to be nearby!” Leone argued.

Inglis agreed. “I’d be more likely to find a strong foe if we’re in the thick of battle.”

“Wellllll...” Miriela hesitated. “It’s not *unheard* of for students to take on a few extracurriculars...but it will be dangerous, so I’d like to

give you a test before I sign off on your participation.”

“Will there be any fights?”

“Yes, there will be fights.”

“Thank you for the opportunity! I’d love to!”

“Ah ha ha, Inglis. You look so prim and proper, but you’re ridiculously hungry for fights,” Miriela said, unable to hide her amusement.

“Yes, I love combat. It really gets my blood pumping.”

Thus, the three decided to take the test for permission for extracurricular activities.



The test was scheduled to occur after class, two days later.

Once the knights’ and squires’ separate lessons concluded for the day, Inglis and the others waited for Principal Miriela in the stone ring. Several other students had gathered to watch after having heard the rumors, and the squire cadet Lahti was among them.

“Oh, hey, Lahti.”

“Y-Yo, Inglis. How are you feeling? Ready for the test?”

“I am. Did you already finish your extra Flygear training?”

“Yeah. I thought it’d be fun to come watch.”

“Well, I don’t know what’s going to happen, so I don’t know if it’ll be fun, exactly.”

“Nah, I think it’s already pretty fun.”

“Really?”

Above Inglis’s head, Rafinha had fired off an incredible burst of Shiny Flow with her Artifact for Inglis to dodge the rain of light as a warm-up, all while Inglis chatted with Lahti, who marveled at the sight.

“Ha ha ha... When people move really fast, it almost looks like they’re splitting into two.”

“Does it?”

“Yeah. I see five or six of you right now. Not complaining, the world would be a better place if it had more beautiful girls like you—” He winced suddenly. “Ow! What was that for, Pullum?!”

The trainee knight Pullum was standing behind Lahti, having practically appeared out of nowhere. She was none too happy. “What nonsense is this? You already have me, Lahti, but you’ve never once called *me* beautiful.”

“Ugh, quit complaining! What does it even matter?”

Inglis turned to Pullum. “Fear not. I’ve heard Lahti worry about you during our classes together.”

“Ugh, Inglis, you don’t need to tell her that!”

“Wow! Really, Lahti? Really, really?” Pullum exclaimed.

Inglis found the whole sight rather charming. She wanted to leave them be.

She turned to Rafinha. "Rani, give me more."

"Sure. There, there, there! Here they come, Chris!"

The rain of light intensified, to the cheers of the onlooking cadets.

"Wow, that's amazing!"

"And she's still dodging them all!"

"It doesn't even look like there's anywhere for her to stand!

What's her secret?!"

Principal Miriela arrived in the midst of the clamor.

"Sorry to keep you waiting— Whoa! What's going on?! If you're wearing yourselves out with this, you won't have anything left for the test!"

"Don't worry. We're warming up."

"R-Really?" Miriela paused, skeptical. "Anyway, let's start the test. Inglis, Rafinha, Leone, are you ready?"

Inglis and friends, lined up before Miriela, answered in unison. "Yes!"

"The test is simple. I'll be sending you somewhere, and if you make it back before the time limit, that means you pass."

"*Somewhere?*" Inglis asked.

"To another dimension created by my Artifact."

"Huh, there are Artifacts that can do that?"

"Mine's a rare one. We call its dimension 'the Labyrinth of Ordeals.' This will test not only your strength but also your spirit. Depending on what happens in there, you may have a hard time. Are you okay with that?" Miriela's expression, usually relaxed and casual, became strict.

But no one was deterred. The three again answered in affirmation.

"Very well. Then—"

"Wait just a moment!" A voice sounded from another direction.

The group looked to see Liselotte, a cadet knight and the daughter of the Chancellor Arcia. Flanking her were the red- and blue-haired twins; the red-haired one was Ban, and the blue-haired one was Ray.

"What is it, Liselotte?" the principal inquired.

"Permission for extracurricular activities is the mark of an elite student! To be the first in one's class to achieve it is an honor! Yet, so unfairly, you offer only these three the opportunity to be tested. I would also like to be included!"

Inglis didn't find fault in that. It was better if everyone had an equal opportunity.

Principal Miriela seemed to agree as well and nodded in agreement. "That's right, Liselotte. You can participate too. Would anyone else like a shot? I will remind you to keep in mind that it's

quite dangerous and not appropriate for everyone.”

Several students stepped forth to answer Principal Miriela’s call, among them Pullum.

“Don’t, Pullum! You’re too clumsy, you’ll just get hurt if you go in alone!” Lahti protested.

“No! I’m going to do it!” Pullum yelled.

“Principal, won’t you stop her?”

Miriela hesitantly said, “She meets the criteria. I’ll allow her to participate.”

“Whaaaaat?! Then I will too! I’m gonna—”

“Hmm...” The principal didn’t seem confident in him. “Sorry.”

“Figured it’d be that way.” Lahti sighed.

“Pullum, will you be okay?” Inglis asked, concerned.

“I’ll be fine! I won’t let you beat me!”

Inglis didn’t know what to make of that. For some reason, Pullum seemed to be really mad at her. Just what did Lahti say to her before? If he had chosen the right words, she probably wouldn’t be doing something so risky. Nonetheless, Inglis had no right to stop her, so she wasn’t particularly concerned.

“With that taken care of, let’s begin. Everyone, over here.” The principal stood before them, and when she tapped her Artifact staff against the ground, countless doors appeared around them. The onlooking students gasped.

“Amazing...” The flows of mana were incredibly complex, beyond Inglis’s current understanding. *That staff has too many powers. Is it really an Artifact—or just something that resembles one? Someday I’d like to find out.*

“Now, each of you choose a door. Beyond it, a trial appropriate to each of you awaits.”

Inglis stood before the door closest to her. “Rani, Leone—you two be careful.”

“Mm-hmm! Let’s do our best!”

“Yes. We’ll show her we can make it through this!”

Inglis and her friends each opened their own door and entered. As Inglis stepped inside, the door closed behind her and disappeared, leaving Inglis alone in a dim twilight.

“Where am I?”

Inglis supposed this was the Labyrinth of Ordeals. She wondered what she could possibly be tasked to fight. An enthusiastic spring in her step, she stepped forward. The light was too dim for her to take in much of her surroundings, but somewhere before her, a white light cut through the darkness. *Do I just need to reach that?*

After a short walk, a figure appeared before her—the Rune-Eater she had defeated only a few days earlier.

“Oooh, now this will be fun.” It seemed like the dimension was recreating her old enemies from her memories. Taking on worthwhile foes again would be wonderful. But as she tensed for combat, the Rune-Eater’s form dissolved again into nothingness.

“Huh?”

With nothing else to do, she walked on. Next to appear was the black-masked leader of the Steelbloods. Inglis again prepared for battle—only for him, too, to fade away.

This was puzzling, indeed.

As she walked on, she saw many other figures: the Steelbloods’ hial menace, Sistia; Cyrene as a magicite beast; Rahl, also as a magicite beast; Leon, the former holy knight; this country’s hial menace, Eris. Yet each disappeared before she could fight them.

“Ah, Rani!”

Then there was Rafinha, appearing as a little girl. She was cute now, of course, but her innocence as a child made her all the more adorable. Inglis squinted at her. There was a young Rafael too, and her father and her mother. Seeing her parents was nostalgic. It felt good to see their faces after so long. Yet she was only being shown memories; there were no foes here. She was going back through time, already reaching the infancy of her new life, and the emptiness stretched on. If it kept going...

She stared at some adults, but they were frowning like children who had lost their parents.

“This is—!”

This sight belonged to the old King Inglis; it was the rows of retainers who waited at the king’s deathbed. “This memory is from my past life...”

She missed them even now, but still—she had questions. “What did you build of Silvare after I was gone? I don’t recall asking you to build a world where some people looked down on others from the heavens.”

Living in a dangerous era was certainly convenient for mastering the blade, but this wasn’t what she had wanted for the good of others. She couldn’t say this world was better than how she’d left it. How had it turned out like this?

However, these people were mere phantoms constructed from her memories. They couldn’t answer even if asked.

A retainer cackled. “Heh heh heh. Your reign has come to an end.”

“Precisely. Let dead kings lie. The world no longer needs you.”

“We shall lay you to rest again.” The dozens of retainers suddenly drew their weapons and surrounded Inglis.

She smiled as she prepared to fight. “Interesting... But weren’t you

just as busy with paperwork as I was? I'll show you a thing or two! Come!"

Inglis beckoned, and the retainers attacked from all sides. "Haaah!"

She leaped high into the air, making a flashy somersault backwards before kicking the rear of an assailant who had come at her from behind.

"Gah?!"

"Whoa!"

The retainer crashed into the one to the left—and at the same time, Inglis swiftly slipped in front of him. "Have another taste!" She struck him with a spinning waist-high kick. The pair she struck smashed into two others, and all four went sprawling.

"Aaaah!" a retainer gasped.

Inglis suddenly appeared before him, raising her voice in a gruff manner. "This is—" Her palm strike punched through his abdomen.

"So fast!" a retainer cried.

She moved to another opponent. "—no time for—" She struck with her elbow.

"I can't see!"

"—idle chatter!" She rammed her body against another foe with all the power of an explosive. The retainer smashed into the walls of the dimension before twisting and fading away.

"I knew you guys would be out of shape," she scoffed.

It hadn't even taken a minute for Inglis to wipe out the retainers from her past life. That was good, but something was amiss.

"Oh drat, now I'm talking like I used to." Inglis strode onward, but her mind was busy reflecting.

That didn't halt the Labyrinth of Ordeals. Before her, a red-haired young man stood. He seemed to be a bit over thirty, but with a statuesque, youthful appearance.

"It's been so long, Your Majesty." He bowed respectfully and kneeled before Inglis.

"Randall..."

He was King Inglis's chosen successor, expected to eventually rule the Silvare Kingdom. He was a genius with both the pen and the sword, yet he did not let his talents go to his head. He always put the needs of others first. Having witnessed his strength and spirit, Inglis would have been unsurprised if Randall, instead, had been chosen to be a divine knight.

The old king had found Randall in an impoverished village and raised him since then. The boy had been akin to a son or younger brother for the king, who never had a partner. With no children, King Inglis had chosen instead to raise an adopted child as a successor.

Randall had been deemed worthy to be such a person.

Inglis faced him and asked, "Why did the world end up like this? No, you can't answer any of my questions, can you?"

This dimension seemed to just replay her memories. It couldn't show her anything she didn't already know.

"Indeed, your Highness." Randall drew his sword.

"Then attack me!"

"Ha ha! I shall!"

Randall's footwork was far faster than that of the retainers. It was on a completely different level. A downward slash from the shoulder, morphing into a spinning sweep, then a quick turn—Inglis saw it all coming anyway and dodged with the elegant footwork of a dancer.

"Haaaah!"

She slipped each forceful attack by a hair's breadth until—

There was a sudden pause.

She had caught the final thrust between her fingers.

"Arghhh!"

"This place isn't enough." Even though it had borrowed Randall's form, she needed it to be stronger. This dimension could produce foes only so strong; it couldn't completely replicate people and their talents. However, the thought of having left her country to a man of this limited caliber still displeased her. "I didn't pick someone good enough," Inglis murmured to herself as she kicked Randall and sent him flying, after which he disappeared. "If I keep going like this, this will just keep—"

What if I see the goddess Alistia?

Inglis had viewed the goddess with something approaching love. That deep infatuation caused the old king to never take up a partner. Inglis still cared about her and definitely didn't want to harm her here—but Goddess Alistia would likely appear. That was what kind of dimension this was; it assaulted intruders through their own weaknesses, their regrets, their doubts. The need to overcome those must be why Miriela had said it would test both her strength and her spirit.

"But that doesn't mean I have to take them on directly."

Inglis looked upward and thrust out her palm. In it, aether gathered into a gigantic sphere of pale blue light. *An Artifact created this dimension, but what if an overwhelmingly destructive Artifact struck it? Time to find out!*

"Aether Strike!"

Crassshhhhhh!

With a sound like the breaking of glass, Inglis's Aether Strike tore through the dimension's walls, piercing upward through several ceilings, suggesting that there was more to the space above.

"If there's something up there, it would be best if I found out now what it is." As Inglis was about to leap upward—

"What in the world was that?!" The face of the knight cadet Liselotte appeared in the hole in the ceiling.

"I see. So it's connected to the others' places," Inglis muttered to herself as she jumped to where Liselotte had poked her head through.

"I-Is this your doing?!" Liselotte asked.

"Indeed. I didn't feel like advancing through it directly anymore."

"Destroying this mysterious dimension— You can do that? Just...wh-what in the world are you?"

"I'm simply a squire. Rafinha Bilford's."

"I know that much, Inglis. You stand out no matter what you're wearing."

"Really?"

"Indeed. But if you are Rafinha's squire, could you kindly tell her that she shouldn't hate her classmates so much? I hadn't intended for her to be an enemy."

"I will...but she was only mad at you for what happened with Leone."

"I don't believe I had much choice. If you consider her situation rather than the girl herself, it makes little sense to trust her. It's natural to keep one's distance from the Olfas. I *am* the daughter of a chancellor. I mustn't be too trusting."

"I'll mention it to Rani... But more importantly, how are you doing? Were you thinking you'd be able to get out fine?"

"It hasn't gone very well. I keep seeing unfortunate memories, and I'm thoroughly tired of it." Liselotte sighed.

"Me too. That's why I decided to force an exit. Shall we go on together?" Inglis pointed to the layers above.

"Sounds interesting. It seems as though we can break out of the design of this distasteful test."

"Yeah, looks that way."

"Then, I shall join alongside you! We're proceeding upward, correct?"

"Yeah. Let's go." Inglis crouched to leap even higher.

"Wait. That won't be necessary." Bright white wings sprouted from Liselotte's back. Inglis surmised they were the Gift from the Artifact halberd she carried. "Take my hand. I'll carry you up."

"Thanks." Inglis accepted her offer and felt herself lift into the air. They flew upward through layer after layer. As they approached the

next, they heard a voice.

“Stop! What are you doing to my brother?!”

It was the voice of a young girl.

“Out of my way! You’re wrong! You don’t need to cover him!”

Inglis knew this voice—it was Leone. What was going on?

“Leone...?!”

Leone, cut all over, breathed heavily as she grasped her dark greatsword.

And facing her was...perhaps a younger Leone? Their faces looked similar. The younger Leone had an intense expression, and her arms were outstretched as she tried to block Leone from something. Behind her was a boy that Inglis recognized as a younger Leon.

The young Leone cried and pleaded. “Stop! My brother’s a holy knight now! He’s our hope! So why are you being so mean to him?!”

“It’s just a facade! It doesn’t mean anything! Someday you’ll understand!” Leone swung her sword at her younger self. Knowing that it wasn’t actually real—that it was a shadow conjured by this dimension—didn’t make fighting a younger version of one’s self less painful.

Two other people were yelling.

“Damn you! And on the day my son is knighted as a holy knight!”

“Everyone! Leon! Protect Leon!”

The pair must have been Leon and Leone’s parents.

“Father! Mother...!” Leone bit her lip, holding in her anguish.

A group of knights encircled her. “Protect Leon!”

“You damned bandit! Are you trying to take this glory away from Ahlemin?!”

“I won’t let you, even if it costs me my life!”

This dimension was turning all of Leone’s proud memories of her brother Leon into foes. Leone’s wounds, and the depletion of her mana, were proof of the fierce battle she’d already gone through.

“It doesn’t matter what you say! I’ll defeat you! And I’ll defeat Leon!” Leone screamed.

Inglis thought Leone was saying this out loud for her own sake more than for anyone else to hear. Leone’s heart was screaming to her, insisting that she reject her pride and all her happy memories. What was left was sorrow and pain. This dimension, where people with scarred hearts had to bare fangs at even more hateful foes, certainly was distasteful. Inglis didn’t care for it.

“If even these memories become foes, she must really have turned against her traitor brother...” Liselotte muttered, a thoughtful expression on her face, as she seemed to realize something.

“I’m going to help Leone. You can go on ahead,” Inglis said as she let go of Liselotte’s hand and jumped to action.

“Get her!”

“Yes, sir!”

“Haaah!”

At the same time, the knights fell upon Leone.

“I’ll cut you all down together!” Leone put her full force into a swing of her Artifact greatsword, intending to extend the sword and sweep through a wide area at once. Inglis was familiar with how Leone used that fighting style against multiple foes. Yet the Artifact only shone for a moment, and it did not transform.

“Ugh...! Did I run out of power? Not now! I still have to fight!”

She had exhausted herself in the battle so far. She didn’t have the mana required to transform the Artifact.

While she lacked the strength she had earlier, the knights went on the attack. Leone received sword strikes from two knights on either side, and she blocked them with her own greatsword, holding it up in the air as if she were about to plunge it into the ground. The strength given to her by an upper-class Artifact was enough to hold it but not much more.

“More! Push her down as a group!”

“Grrraaah!” the knights yelled as about five more of them pressed in on her with their swords.

“Ngh...” Leone, already at the limits of her mana, couldn’t push them back.

“Her back’s wide open!” One knight circled behind her.

“So what?!” Leone kicked forcefully at the blade of the knight who danced around behind her, repelling the foe. Her rear was safe, but now the problem was the front. Pushed backward by the knights, she took two or three stumbling steps backwards.

“Ugh...” she grunted, her stance completely broken. At this rate, she’d be overrun.

A shadow darted in from the side at high speed.

“Haaah! I will protect Leon with my life!” Leone’s father rushed at her with a short spear and thrust it forward with more speed and force than that of the other knights.

“Father...!” In the instant she realized she couldn’t avoid his strike, the tears Leone had been holding back suddenly welled up in her eyes. Through her hazy vision, she could only barely see something coming toward her.

She caught sight of brilliant platinum-blond hair, glowing as if it had the shine of the moon woven into it.

“Sorry to intrude.” Inglis’s palm plunged into Leone’s father’s cheek.

“Gahhh?!”

His face distorted as he flew into the walls of the dimension. He disappeared, leaving only echoes of his scream.

Next, Inglis flitted to the sides of the knights pushing Leone down and delivered a first, then a second, flash-like kick.

“Aaaarrrgh!” they screamed. The knights pushing Leone down were also destroyed.

“There’s still more!” She continued, diving into the other knights with palm and elbow strikes as they let out cries.

“Wh-Who...?! Ugh!”

“I can’t see where—”

“Have the heavens abandoned us?!”

The remaining enemies were blown away and disintegrated before they could even react.

Inglis had one thing left to say to the fading shadows of those knights. “That’s what you get for ganging up on a girl.”

“I-Inglis...?!” Leone exclaimed.

“Yeah, I’m here. I just happened to be passing by. Glad I made it in time.”

“H-How did you get here?”

“I broke the connected walls of the dimension, until I reached here.”

“Ha ha ha... You’re absurd. That’s absolutely ignoring the point of the test.”

“It’s fine. The principal never said we couldn’t. Anyway, are you okay?” Inglis wiped Leone’s tears away and patted her head.

“Oh... Yeah. I’m fine. Thank you.”

“I see. That’s good.”

The last two shadows remained in the way. “I won’t let you get to my brother! Anyone but him!” the young Leone yelled. Nearby was young Leon.

“There’s still...!” Leone winced.

“It’s okay. I’ll do it.” Inglis held her friend back, but before she could move herself—

Slash! Slash!

Something flew toward the young siblings and pierced them. They twisted and then disappeared.

Leone stared in confusion.

“That’s—” Inglis turned her head.

A glimmering platinum halberd rose from the ground where they were.

“Y-You’re...”

“Liselotte? You lent a hand.”

Liselotte strode to retrieve the halberd planted in the ground. “Attacking them would have been hard for you or your friend to do, wouldn’t it? I thought it would be best if I took the initiative instead.”

“Yeah, that was helpful.”

“Thanks...”

As Leone cautiously thanked her, Liselotte briefly made eye contact. “I still don’t trust you completely, but I apologize for being so hurtful the other day. I’m sorry.”

“Mm...” Leone, shocked, was left speechless.

“I didn’t expect you to be such a nice person, Liselotte,” Inglis said.

“Saying ‘I didn’t expect’ was unnecessary.” Liselotte turned her head and pouted.

Maybe all’s well that ends well, Inglis thought.





Inglis and the others continued to make their way above from Leone's floor. The power of Liselotte's Artifact let her carry both Inglis and Leone. And when they'd flown to the highest point, a glimmer of white light appeared beyond the hole in the ceiling. The three of them touched it.

In only a moment, they were back in the stone ring on the academy's grounds.

"Hm? Looks like we made it out," Inglis said.

"Oh... We really did," Leone said.

"Yes, it appears that way," Liselotte remarked.

Behind them, they could see the doors, just like when they had entered.

"Welcome back!" Principal Miriela called. "But—huh? You came out a different door than you entered, didn't you? And all three from the same door?"

"Nothing unusual happened."

"Really? Hmm... I must have slipped up somewhere..." Principal Miriela shook her head.

"That's quite the lie after we forced our way out," Liselotte whispered.

Leone and Inglis kept their voices down as well. "Yeah... And you helped me on the way."

"It's better if we all pass, though," Inglis said. "We don't want to take that test again."

Liselotte agreed. "You're right. We should get our story straight."

"Yep. I don't want to do that again," Leone groaned.

"Principal Miriela, did we pass?" Inglis asked, turning to their test proctor.

"Well... You all came out a door, and that's all I can judge you on. Very well. Inglis, Leone, Liselotte, you pass! Well done!"

Liselotte's two retainers rushed up to her.

"Lady Liselotte, you're amazing!" Ban exclaimed.

"We never expected anything less, milady," Ray said.

"Why, it wasn't difficult at all!" Liselotte proudly declared.

Ban and Ray glared sideways at Leone. "But is it okay that you made it through alongside *her*?"

"It's possible she's plotting something against you." They were still very suspicious of Leone's sister.

"Oh, stop that. I accept that you're protective of me, but that's no reason to accuse her of such wrongdoing."

"Oh?" Ban sighed. "Got it."

“As you wish, milady.” The two nodded, a look of shock on their faces.

“Let’s rest. I’m a bit worn out. I’d like to watch the others.”
Liselotte left the stone ring.

“I’ll get something for you to sit on!”

“And perhaps I’ll find something to drink.”

The two retainers worked hard to look after Liselotte. As Leone watched them, Inglis clapped a hand on her shoulder and said, “That must have been tough on you, but I think she understands you a little better now.”

“Yeah... I hope so. Anyway, thanks for helping me. You looked so cool then, my heart was pounding! It’s strange. Even though you’re a girl...”

“Ha ha ha, well, I appreciate the compliment.” Inglis still had a different take on her gender from the norm, so maybe some of that masculinity was shining through. She wasn’t sure it was a good thing, but she didn’t think it was bad either. “I wonder how Rani did.” Inglis looked around for Rafinha but couldn’t find her.

Instead, she spotted Pullum, sitting next to Lahti outside the ring.
“Did you pass?”

“No, she failed right at the beginning,” Lahti answered. “Right when she started, a hole opened up and kind of threw her out.”

“Really?”

“Ugh... I didn’t want to let you beat me...” Pullum mumbled, her spirits low.

“You’re too clumsy,” Lahti said. “Even if you have an upper-class Rune, you’re not suited to fighting alone. But there’s no use crying over spilled milk. Cheer up.”

“If you call me cute, I’ll feel better. Say I’m cute.”

“What?! Something silly like that is all it would take?!”

“Well, you said Inglis was cute, didn’t you?”

“Ugh, this again?”

Inglis thought he should tell her that she was attractive, but she understood his reluctance. Boys’ hearts worked like that. They couldn’t be honest with those they loved. He didn’t look at Inglis the same way, so that made it easier for him to be honest. Only time would wash away his apprehension.

“Anyway, Rani isn’t back yet,” Inglis said.

“Yeah, seems like it. Let’s wait for her.”

However, sitting around doing nothing would be boring. Inglis began to think about how she could use the free time for some kind of training.

“Principal Miriela, can I ask you something?”

“What is it, Inglis?”

“While we’re waiting for Rani, I want to practice under the higher gravity you showed me. Can you do that?”

“Huh? You want to do more of that? Well, I can help, but... You want to do that now of all times?”

“Yes! Please! And make it stronger this time!”

“Well, I said I could, so I don’t mind. Then I’ll cast it on that side of the ring.” Principal Miriela called out to those around her. “Anyone who doesn’t want to be affected by it, please move away. But this time I don’t mind if you use your Artifact’s power, so feel free to practice with it!”

“Can I join in? Training’s important,” Leone said.

“Me too. I won’t lose to you!” Liselotte hopped up.

“Lady Liselotte! Us too!”

“Allow myself to partake as well.”

“M-Me too!”

“Don’t, Pullum! Ah sheesh, guess I will too...”

Everyone wanted to join in.

“Here goes, then! The strongest I can do right now!”

Thuuud!

It was a far greater load than they’d imagined.

“Ugh...! Th-This is amazing!” Inglis had already increased the gravity on herself as well.

The combined effect made her body feel like lead—no, it was far stronger than that. If she wasn’t careful, she’d be crushed under her own weight. She managed to stand without being forced to her knees, but the flow of mana around her—she needed to remember, and well, how to increase the load. If she could replicate it, she could make her personal training more intense.

“Grrrr... I can’t stand, I can’t move, I’m gonna diiiieee...” Lahti slumped to the ground, his eyes about to roll back in his head.

“Lahti! Ah... Eek!” Pullum stumbled on top of Lahti.

“Gaaah...”

They seemed to be having a hard time.

“Damn it! I can’t move!”

“My lady, are you okay?” Ban and Ray were completely hunched down on their rears.

“S-Somehow...”

“Ugh... It’s so heavy...” Leone grunted.

Liselotte and Leone were kneeling, trying to force themselves to their feet, but neither they nor anyone else seemed likely to move anytime soon. For now, Inglis figured it was probably best to get Lahti out of danger and out of the ring.

Inglis turned off her own added gravity. Now, under only the weight of Principal Miriela's technique, it was much easier to move. "Haaah!" She tried to jump. And rose into the air, as expected. She completed a somersault before coming back down with a thud.

"Whaaat?!" they all yelled, gasping in awe. Their own bodies were telling them that such a thing was impossible under this weight.

Inglis approached Lahti, picked him up, and carried him out of the gravity field. "There you go! Are you okay?"

"Ha ha ha... This is so embarrassing, I'm getting princess-carried by someone who could be a princess..."

"It's fine. From now on, consider us having gender equality." Next, she carried Ban and Ray, both of whom couldn't move, out of the field. "Phew. Even this is pretty hard work now." Inglis wiped the pooling sweat from her forehead.

Leone and Liselotte were left speechless as they watched.

"N-No way... She's moving so quickly even now."

"And she's a squire without a Rune... This makes no sense at all."

Even Principal Miriela's eyes widened. "You really are amazing... I've never seen anyone move like that under that much weight."

"Thank you. Shall I carry you two out of here?" Inglis asked the two other girls in the ring.

Gritting their teeth, the two willed themselves to move.

"I'm fine. I'll do it myself somehow...!"

"I refuse. I can't lose to you!"

"That's it! Inspired by your friend, you push yourselves! What a beautiful sight! Do your best! ♪" Principal Miriela was glad to see the pair determined to remain.

Suddenly, a door appeared. As it opened, everyone saw Rafinha inside.

"Huh? I made— Uggghhhh! Wh-What the heck is this?!"

"Ah, Rani. Welcome back," Inglis said. "You made it through without issues? That's good." Coming out of a door seemed to mean she passed, so she probably had. Coming out right into the middle of the higher gravity was just an unlucky accident.

"But I *do* have an issue! It's so heavy here! Chris, save meee!" Rafinha whined.

"Okay, okay. I'll be right there."

"No, Rafinha!" Leone said. "Stand with your own strength!"

"You mustn't just rely on others!" Liselotte encouraged.

"That's right, Rafinha! Try your hardest!" Miriela called.

Rafinha couldn't help being confused. "Huuuuuh? What kind of commotion is this? Even the Principal is in on it?"

In any case, Inglis and friends had passed the test. They had gained permission to accept the offer from Fars of the Rambach

Company.

Chapter V: Inglis, Age 15—The Chiral Knights' Academy (5)

The day for offerings to Highland had arrived.

The academy's students would be deployed as guards in the vicinity of the area to assist the knights, whose forces were spread thin. However, Inglis and her friends had secured permission for a different activity agreed upon by the school: As requested by Fars, they would be directly guarding the Rambach Company during the group's negotiations.

Inglis, along with Rafinha and Leone, met Fars first thing in the morning. Their rendezvous point was the harbor on Lake Bolt. A Flygear Port stood ready there, and the company's goods were being loaded onto it.

When loading was complete, the large ornithopter took off. On board was the company's leader, Fars; several other executives; and their guards, Inglis and friends.

"We've climbed quite a bit, haven't we? We're really high up!" Rafinha exclaimed loudly as she looked down over the railing of the Flygear Port. The blue expanse of Lake Bolt looked like a puddle, and the cityscape of the adjacent capital was pea-sized.

"Yep. We've made it up to the clouds. It's incredible," Inglis said. This was the first time she had been so high in the sky, and the indescribable feeling was novel. Even in her past life, it was something she'd never experienced.

"It's a little scary, though..." Leone looked like her knees would give way.

"Then you'd better hurry up and get used to it," Rafinha insisted. "C'mon! Lean out and take a look!"

"Eeek! Wait—stop, Rafinha! It's scary!"

Inglis spoke up. "Well, we're going to have to get used to it eventually. We might have to fight at this altitude someday."

Fars's eyes narrowed in a smile as he watched Inglis and her friends. "Ha ha ha. You're dazzling even while waiting around today."

Inglis had questions for him. "Fars, it seems there's been no movement for a while, correct?"

Their ship was flanked by a number of other Flygear Ports carrying resources from the surface, but each was holding altitude rather than moving. The other Flygear Ports seemed to be loaded high

with goods sourced from the kingdom itself. And Inglis had heard that the official in charge on the kingdom's side of the delivery was Liselotte's father, Chancellor Arcia. He was likely aboard one of the Flygear Ports. The Rambach Company's participation in the delivery of goods from the kingdom to Highland was an exception; it was unusual for other parties to be present.

"Well, it's not unusual for higher-ups to keep underlings waiting. If we wait a little bit, I'm sure Highland's flying ship will show up," Fars said as he rubbed the bandana covering his forehead.

He was right. After some time passed, a gigantic ship broke through the clouds and appeared. It was a battleship, with a reinforced ramming prow and gunports studding the hull, sailing through the air.

"Amazing...!" Inglis had never seen even an oceangoing ship so big. How many Flygears, even Flygear Ports, could it carry?

"Yeah, it really is. I wonder what it's like inside," Rafinha said.

"This will be a valuable learning opportunity," Leone noted, studious. "Be sure to pay close attention."

As the Highlander ship approached and hovered nearby, Flygear Port after Flygear Port carrying materials from the surface landed on its armored deck. Of course, the Flygear Port carrying Inglis was no exception.

A Highlander who seemed to be some kind of official approached and gave them orders. "We'll handle the cargo. You wait inside."

Flanking him were figures in full armor who seemed almost like statues. They were likely his guards. Several other Highlanders were on the deck, including other guards.

"All right, let's go." Fars began to lead the others below deck.

"Fars, did those guards in armor come from the surface?" Inglis asked quietly as they walked down a staircase.

"Yeah. They were originally people from the surface. Highlanders buy or kidnap slaves from the surface and turn them into pawns. There aren't many Highlanders willing to fight on the front lines themselves."

Inglis hesitated as she remembered something. "Rahl had someone like that with him."

"It's a sad, sad story—what the Highlanders won't dirty their hands with themselves, they make people from the surface do."

Rafinha and Leone frowned. It really was an upsetting topic.

"The reason the Highlanders are dealing with merchants like us is to procure things that're difficult for the king to requisition—meaning, slaves. Our last boss was in that kind of business. His 'achievements' in the field were why he and Rahl were able to become Highlanders. But with me in charge, we've washed our hands of that business."

Fars, talking with his shoulders slumped, seemed to have gotten himself worked up enough to lose his way. Turning a corner, he ran into something with a loud thump. It was a stocky, short, humanoid mass of dark iron—a Highland golem. He gasped, grumbling a “Shoot!”

Recognizing Fars as an intruder, it raised a beefy fist and gave chase with a groaning sound—only to stop dead in its tracks. Held back by Inglis’s pale, slender hands, the golem was completely immobilized.

“Stand back, Fars.”

“O-Of course! Sorry!”

As Inglis saw Fars back away, she released the iron golem—only for it to continue its attack as if it could not stop its attacks once it had begun.

“There might be trouble if we just destroy it. Can you get us approval?” she asked.

“Got it! Hold on a minute!”

“Chris, are you okay?!” Rafinha cried.

“I’m fine. This seems like a fun way to kill time. If you’re feeling frustrated, it’s nice to get a workout.” Inglis’s replies came casually while she parried the golem’s attacks. In the meantime, Fars called over a Highlander and received the approval they needed.

“Very well, then!” Inglis said, switching to the offensive.

Klaaaang!

Inglis’s fist struck the golem with a rumbling sound, and the iron cracked before crumbling away.

“Amazing! You’re so powerful!” Fars exclaimed.

“S-So when it’s not a magicite beast...” Leone muttered.

“It turns out like this...” Rafinha said.

Inglis grinned. “Yep. That was refreshing. Anyway, let’s go.”

With the golem taken care of, they continued without losing their way again to the cabin, where they were expected to wait.

“Is this the place?”

Armored soldiers from Highland and knights from Karelia stood at the entrance. A peek at the back of the room revealed an important figure guarded by proper knights. That must have been Liselotte’s father, Chancellor Arcia.

“This is the room for the chancellor and other important people. Ours is farther in.”

Rafinha held a finger to her lips wistfully. “So we’re split into separate cabins? That’s a shame. The food there looked delicious.”

“Ha ha ha. There’ll be some in our room too,” Fars said.

“Really? Then let’s go! Right, Chris?”

“Mm.”

Rafinha pulled Inglis by the hand into the inner cabin. It was more cramped than the previous one, and the waiting meals were not as elaborate.

“Quite the difference in treatment!” Rafinha noted.

“Yeah... But this will be tasty in its own right too,” Inglis said.

Even while complaining, the two of them were already making their move on the food.

“Well, those higher-ups probably have things to talk about that aren’t meant for the ears of lessers like us, so let’s grin and bear it,” Fars said. “Especially since I’ve heard rumors that there’s a pretty sketchy deal going down.”

“Sketchy, as in?” Leone probed Fars.

Fars paused. “Hey, you didn’t hear nothin’ from me, right? Plus, it’s just a rumor.”

“Of course. Inglis, Rafinha, you’re fine with that, right?”

“Veh! (Yeah!)” the two said.

“Sheesh, you don’t have to talk with your mouths full...” Leone chastised.

“Hey, they’re still growing. They must be hungry,” Fars said.

“Honestly, it’s not fair that they can eat that much and not get fat... Anyway, never mind that. Tell us more.”

Fars took a breath in. “Land. It’s land. I’ve heard they’re handing over control of the town of Shazer and its countryside.”

“Hiff, vaf...! (Chris, that’s...!)”

“Fm. Vaffut hafem veh Ahn vuh...! (Mm. That’s what happened where Rin was...!)”

“And Prince Wayne approved of that?” Leone asked.

“Well, why do you think this deal is happening now, when the capital is under a light guard? Because Prince Wayne, who opposes it, isn’t here. This is their chance. Since he’s gone, though, that also leaves security lax. There’ll be big trouble if someone like the Steelbloods target them.”

“So, put the other way, it’s a golden opportunity for the Steelbloods...” Such an occurrence would be fortuitous for Leone, Inglis knew. Leone was probably hoping Leon would show up, so she could deal with him herself.

“Probably, yeah. And beyond that, Highland’s Ambassador Muenthe, who’s in charge of the deal, has a very bad reputation. I can also see someone snapping, killing him, and blaming it on the Steelbloods. Meaning, we’re in a danger zone where nothing should surprise us.”

Rafinha took another bite. “Ah fee... (I see...)”

“We fan wehaw gawr vun— (We can’t let our guard down—)”

“Could you please swallow before you speak? You’re being very rude,” Leone scolded.

“Mm...” Inglis took a moment to finish the food she’d been chewing. “Meaning, this is probably gonna be fun.”

“Ahhh, it’s like you’re just *waiting* for something to happen,” Rafinha said, her mouth no longer full of food.

“Well, why don’t you take a look, and tell me what you think?” Fars spoke quietly as he cast his eyes toward the door of the cabin, from which a person appeared. He was an extremely obese man with the forehead stigmata that was the mark of a Highlander. Behind him stood a large man with long white hair who appeared to be his guard, with no stigmata but a muscular physique and unusually sharp eyes. He had an extremely unique presence, suggesting considerable power. In Inglis’s eyes, it seemed that he, rather than the Highlander, stood out more.

“Oho hyo hyo. Excellent work, Fars.”

“Ha ha! I see you’re in a good mood, Lord Muenthe. I thank you for, yet again, accepting our meager offerings.”

“Mm-hm. Shady merchants are better at supplying shady goods. I’m but a simple man, so I hope you continue to serve me.”

“Ha ha.”

“And who might that be with you? Unfamiliar faces, certainly.”

“Guards I recently hired. Cadets at the knights’ academy.”

“Oho ho ho ho!” The Highlander Muenthe sidled toward Inglis. “Well, well, well! Such a beautiful girl, an absolute gem!” As he spoke, he reached out a hand toward Inglis’s hair.

Smack!

Inglis, of course, had slapped his hand away, but Muenthe was undeterred.

“And she smells so good. Ahh, I can’t resist!” He sniffed at Inglis like a dog.

“Ugh?!” Feeling uncomfortable, she stepped back.

“Nothing’s excited me like this in so long!” Next, he reached towards Inglis’s chest as if it were his natural prerogative.

“Eek?!” Inglis let out a yelp of surprise, but under no inclination to allow him to touch her, grabbed his arm and twisted it upward.

“Aaagh! What are you doing?!”

“I should be the one asking you that!”

Then, the guard with long white hair grabbed Inglis’s hand to pry it free. He was strong, but Inglis didn’t let go. It was a simple test of strength; he wanted to remove her hand, and she didn’t want to let go.

“Hurry up and help me!” Muenthe pleaded.

“I...I am!” the man responded hesitantly.

“Is she stronger than you...?!”

“Hey, hey, wait! Muenthe, this isn’t a good idea!” Fars cut in.

“C’mon, man. She’s one of my guards. These girls aren’t *those* kinds of escorts!” He turned to her next. “Let him go, Inglis!”

“Understood.” Inglis released her grip after a moment, as did the guard, leaving Muenthe to puff into his hand.

“Y-Your name is Inglis, is it? Is there something you desire? Money? Treasure? Food? Power? Anything at all? What can I give you to make you mine, hmm?”

“Ha ha ha... How about your life?”

At her malicious reply, Muenthe yelped and fled.

“Well, as you can see, that’s how he is. Now do you understand what I meant?” Fars shrugged after Muenthe had left.

“Yes. Quite well...”

“I can’t believe how much of a creep he is to women!” Rafinha groaned.

“If he’s always like that, I can see why people would want him dead,” Leone said.

“There are times when it makes my stomach turn, but business is business. Anyway, sorry to subject you to that unpleasantness.” Fars dipped his head apologetically.

“No, it was my choice to accept your offer,” Inglis said.

“But why is someone like that an ambassador for Highland?” Rafinha asked. “It’s not like there are no good Highlanders. We know that much.”

Fars shook his head. “The Highlanders I know are more or less that way. Maybe the one you know is a rare exception... Not to imply that any of them are innocent, but at least you can come to an understanding with Muenthe. He’s the one who removed the restriction on sending Flygears and Flygear Ports to the surface.”

Inglis nodded. “I get it... So he’s scum, but he’s useful scum?”

“Yeah, exactly.”

“But isn’t Prince Wayne, who’s against offering land to them, excited about Flygears?” Rafinha asked.

“Well, some would say that on the one hand he’s full of pretty words, but on the other hand he’s focused on what benefits him.”

“You seem to know quite a bit about this.”

Despite being unconnected to the upper classes, Fars was quite familiar with the politics of the capital.

“Well, it’s not something knights or nobles could say too loudly, you know? But if you spill it to an outsider, a merchant, it’s just gossip.”

“The kingdom’s leadership isn’t monolithic, you mean?”

“Yes. There is turbulence between His Majesty the King and Prince Wayne. Chancellor Arcia, as the current chancellor, sides with the king. As I said before, most of the prince’s men are not present in the capital at the moment.”

“Which if anything would make it unsurprising if they interfered,” Inglis said.

“But...Chris, Prince Wayne is friends with Rafael. I don’t think he’s the type of person to do such a thing,” Rafinha replied.

“I agree. Only the Steelbloods would resort to such foul tactics,” Leone added.

Inglis nodded. “Yeah, I agree.”

“But it’s not just that, right? Highland isn’t monolithic either,” Fars said. “I’ve heard there are people up there who oppose Muenthe’s faction after Highland sent Flygears and Flygear Ports to the surface.”

“Dissidents from Highland, you’re saying,” Inglis said, following what he meant.

“Yes.”

“The Steelbloods, the prince’s men in the kingdom, Highland’s own dissidents, or someone with a personal grudge...” Inglis listed off the various parties one by one. “Such an extravagant menu of options here.”

Rafinha sighed. “It’s beginning to feel like there’s no chance of just nothing happening.”

“You saw my brother, so I think the Steelbloods will most likely make an appearance.”

“Yeah, but the more enemies the better.”

“I think that’s just you, Chris.” Just as Rafinha spoke—

Boooooom!

The wall between them and the next cabin was blown away with a thunderous roar.

“Mm...! Is it already here?”

“Don’t look so happy about it, Chris! I see you smiling!”

“Anyway, what’s going on?!” Leone yelled. “Is Leon here?!”

In the cabin beyond the blown-out wall, they could see Chancellor Arcia, his knights around him, facing Muenthe and his guard. Someone had tried to attack Muenthe, and their missed assault had destroyed the wall.

“Oho hyo hyo ho! You ruffians! Will you not protect me?!” Muenthe called out. Several of Chancellor Arcia’s knights had broken off and tried to kill him.

Voices rang out. “Stop them!”

“Have you gone mad?!”

“Draw your swords!” Arcia commanded as he and the other knights tried to stop them.

The attacking knights refuted him. “Lord Chancellor! We can’t stand back and watch this pig’s violence!”

“Indeed! You must know how much oppression he’s brought forth!”

“This is for our kingdom’s sake! This is our loyalty!”

But Chancellor Arcia roared back at them. He was a slender man, seemingly without much physical might, but his dignity was enough to give him force. “Loyalty is following orders precisely! Our lives are not our own!”

“But, Lord Chancellor...!”

“No matter what we think is best personally, think of what will befall His Majesty and our country as a result of your selfish acts! Those who can’t do that are nothing but hotheads!”

“If I may speak, Lord Chancellor! No harm will befall them!” a knight insisted.

“What...?!” Arcia gasped.

“All we need to do is to blame it all on the Steelbloods! That explanation will stick! We’re up here in the sky, so it’s not like anyone will find out the truth!”

“And if we dispose of this pig, another ambassador will come soon!”

“Thanks to us taking precautions against the Steelbloods by meeting in the air, this is our best opportunity!”

Understanding flashed in Arcia’s eyes. “Th-That’s true—”

“That might be true! Is this our chance?”

Before long, the knights who were trying to stop the assassins had been swayed to the other side. Meaning, this was all their plan to assassinate Muenthe and blame the Steelbloods.

“Lord Chancellor! Order us to slay him!”

“Lord Chancellor!”

“We beg of you!”

But Chancellor Arcia did not nod. “The life we have been given is to ensure the flow of offerings and grants!”

“Ugh...! Then just watch!”

“Grr... Hey, they noticed us!”

Several of Highland’s armored soldiers, possibly drawn by the commotion, showed themselves at the door to the cabin.

Even the knights who had at first sought to stop the assassins now leaned toward the option of killing the ambassador. They stood in the way of the door, blocking the armored soldiers. “Leave this to us!”

“Hurry up and do it!”

“You guys...!”

“Thanks! We won’t let your valor be wasted!”

“Ugh...! Wait, you fools!” Chancellor Arcia yelled, but at this point, nothing he could say would stop them.

“Oho ho hyo?! Hey, Inglis, sweetheart! Save me!” Noticing her beyond the blown-out wall, Muenthe pleaded in a pitiful voice.

“I only came to guard Fars.”

“F-Fars!”

“Ah, ah, ah! I can’t hear! I can’t hear! I can’t hear anything!” Fars chanted loudly while plugging his ears, signaling his intent to stay out of this.

“Prepare yourselves!” The knights advanced on Muenthe, brandishing their Artifacts.

“Protect me! Show no mercy!” the ambassador ordered.

“Hee hee hee heeeeeee...” The white-haired guard stood unsteadily before Muenthe, speaking to the knights with an eerie voice. “Mana! Give me moooooore!” Runes appeared all over his body. Inglis recognized him as the Rune-Eater.

“I knew it! That’s the murderer from before!” she said. “This time he’s showing his face and hiding his Runes, but—!” The man she had fought had possessed a similar presence, and the similarity had momentarily crossed Inglis’s mind before. However, she’d cleaved him in two, so how could he be alive?!

“Oho hyo! Eat, eat! They’re your new food!” Muenthe called out to the Rune-Eater from behind.

“Don’t fool around with us!” The knights rushed in.

“Look out! It’s dangerous!” Inglis tried to stop the knights. But it was already too late—as they clashed, the monster’s blades of ice sliced through the knights’ windpipes.

“Wha—?! In an instant?!”

“You guys...!” The knights fighting the soldiers shouted in shock.

“Them too! Go ahead—devour them!”

“Give me moooooore!” The monster overran them in an instant, slashing at them. Then he began to devour the Runes from their corpses. “Taaaasty!”

The parts eaten by the monster turned into something like black coal and were swallowed into his body. And the number of Runes floating on his form increased equally with the number of corpses devoured. It really was a Rune-Eater.

Rafinha and Leone trembled. “What’s going on?! Is it—?!”

“It’s eating their Runes?!”

“Oho hyo hyo hyo! Good boy, good boy! I’m so glad I created you, and my theory about this behavior was correct! My mind terrifies even myself.” Muenthe clapped his hands in glee.

At this point, the knights' hope that they could take down Muenthe was completely lost. Not a single knight present was standing, leaving Chancellor Arcia alone.

"Can I ask you something?" Inglis asked Muenthe as she strode into the next room.

"Ho hyo? So you've reconsidered, and you'll be mine? I have a big heart, so my offer still stands, of course."

"No thanks, I'll pass. I'm more concerned about how your guard's the murderer who was terrorizing the capital. Were you the one who sent him out to attack Rune-holders? I'd like an explanation."

Muenthe had been present ostensibly as Highland's ambassador under friendly relations. If he was involved in several murders, that would be of great concern.

"What?! I'd heard of the murderer, but—!" Chancellor Arcia was reeling. "Are you saying it was him?!"

"There's no mistaking it," Inglis replied. "I defeated him. Honestly, I'm shocked he's still alive."

"I'd heard the attacks had stopped recently, but..."

"Oho hyo. So you were the one who defeated my creation. Seeing your strength up close, I can believe it. Yes, I was the one who released my work into the city. To make them stronger."

"Them?"

"I'm a cautious man, so I made sure to have a spare!"

"I see. As I thought, he couldn't have survived."

Inglis fully understood: There had been two Rune-Eaters from the beginning.

The chancellor raised his voice. "That's a big problem! No matter your faults, you're the ambassador of Highland. Our kingdom has a relationship with yours, and yet—!"

"Oho hyo? And? You would never have known if you weren't told. Think of them as being killed by magicite beasts. It happens day after day anyway."

"Defending my country is my duty, whether it's from magicite beasts or other threats! What sort of threats matters not!"

"Oho hyo. You're so hardheaded, chancellor. Your men also just tried to kill me, didn't they? Isn't that a problem as well?"

"Of course that's an issue. It needn't be debated."

"So we're even. Let it be water under the bridge. After all, it seems your men were out of control."

"Then I must be punished, and you must atone."

Inglis got the impression that Chancellor Arcia was an earnest man and a stickler for the rules. That was why he was trustworthy. He was respectable, worthy of his position.

"Oho hyo. Pardon me. There's no reason to quibble over the lives

of surface dwellers. You'd die without our Artifacts. You should be grateful that you were able to be the cornerstone of my research."

"I pray that the ambassador who succeeds you has a different view."

"Oho hyo hyo! How annoying! Go ahead, devour him if you'd like!"

"Hya ha ha ha ha!" The Rune-Eater sprang forth.

"You there!" Chancellor Arcia turned to Inglis and the others. "You're cadets at the academy, right? That makes you the knights' reserves! I urgently order you to assume guard duty! You're to protect —"

"Yes, sir!"

Before the chancellor could finish his sentence, Inglis had activated Aether Shell and leaped behind the Rune-Eater. She plunged a high kick into his back.

"Gwahhhhhh?!"

Smaasssh!

The incredible force of the blow sent the monster slamming through an exterior wall with portholes. The shock of the impact sent him flying all the way into the air.

As Arcia finished his sentence, his voice trailed off. "...me?"

"Oho ho hyo hyo hyo!"

A personal guard had to always stay alert. No matter the care she'd put into her use of Aether Shell, both Chancellor Arcia and Muenthe were stock-still in awe.

"Chancellor, my lord," Inglis called out.

Arcia was speechless.

"Chancellor, my lord. May I ask you something?"

"Yes, yes, sorry. You're, err—"

"Inglis Eucus. First-year squire cadet."

"A squire?! With that power?"

"That's not important now. What would you like me to do with him? Capture him? Or punish him?"

"Capture him. His Majesty must pass judgment."

"Are you sure he'll receive a proper punishment?"

"Of course. I swear on my honor."

"Understood." Inglis advanced toward Muenthe.

"Ho hyo hyo hyo hyo! I won't let that happen, Inglis!"

Vwoom!

The air in front of Muenthe appeared to twist. From a rift, the

Rune-Eater reemerged.

“He’s back?” She could feel a strong flow of mana.

“Ha ha! Teleportation! I know he doesn’t look it, but he’s a loyal one!”

“Then I’ll need to find another way to defeat him.”

Inglis converted some of the aether swirling around her to mana and used that to make an ice sword. Normal weapons couldn’t stand the strain of being wreathed with active aether and would be destroyed in the process. This ice shaped into a blade was no exception and had shattered after a single blow before. But that just meant that she could get a single sword blow in even with Aether Shell. Unlike normal weapons, this one didn’t cost money, so she could get practical use out of it without hurting her pockets.

“Rani, take care of the chancellor. Leone, stay with Fars.”

“Got it, Inglis!” Leone said.

“Yeah! You beat him before, you’ll be fine!” Rafinha cheered.

“Yep. I’ll be fine.” Inglis raised her sword and advanced on the Rune-Eater.

“Oho hyo! Don’t you realize why it was quiet for a while after you killed the last one? It’s because I was making him better—stronger! Get her!” Muenthe snapped his fingers.

“Gwaaaaah!” The Runes on the creature’s body began to glow blood-red. He clutched his head as if in pain, but the mana only intensified.

“Oho hyo hyo hyo! This is a monster who, rather than getting nutrition from food, takes mana from others! By increasing his mana metabolism, he grows hungry sooner, but his power increases! Hurry and devour them, or you’ll starve to death! Devour all of them but Inglis! If you do, you’ll become stronger and win!”

“Graaawr?! Give...mana...” The Rune-Eater kicked off the ground and tried to dive past Inglis to Rafinha.

“He’s coming straight for us!” the chancellor cried.

“Leave it to me,” Rafinha said.

However, Inglis stepped into the Rune-Eater’s path, grabbing his arm and throwing him into the wall. Once again, the wall was destroyed, sending the Rune-Eater falling away.

“Oho hyo?! Isn’t it getting through to you?”

Vwoom!

The air in front of Muenthe warped again.

“Gaaah!” The Rune-Eater was back again.

“Oho hyo! Go further! Raise your metabolism to the limit!”

The Runes shined an even deeper red. “Abyaaahhhh!” The Rune-

Eater kicked off the floor, flying around at high speed while bouncing off the ceiling and walls. His speed had kicked up a notch. It was impressive—but not untraceable.

“Not yet. You’ll still never lay a finger on Rani like that.”

Smassssh!

Next, the monster went for Leone, only to be kicked from the ship again.

“Are you at your limit? Then, next time I’ll finish you off.”

Inglis had no mercy for anyone who threatened Rafinha. Muenthe was guilty, but if he was to be captured to have judgment passed upon him, she would obey; she would not harm him.

“Ugh...! Oho hyo hyo hyo! Go! Surpass your limits!” Muenthe howled at the Rune-Eater, who was back yet again.

“Gwaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhh!” The Rune-Eater let loose a half-crazed shout—and, seeing Muenthe’s back before him, plunged a karate chop through his chest.

“Oho hyo?! That’s not right—why are you devouring me?” Muenthe cried. His body turned to something resembling black coal, and his own creation devoured him.

“Tasty!” the creature said.

“Beyond his limits, he can no longer tell friend from foe. Pitiful,” Inglis remarked. “I don’t sympathize.”

But if Muenthe had kept his mouth shut, he’d probably still be alive.

“Give me more!” The Rune-Eater, even stronger now, charged toward Inglis.

“Anyway, all that effort is for nothing, you know?”

She had completely read his movement and slashed through him in a flash. This time, the Rune-Eater was cleaved in half through the waist, and fell to the ground.

Chapter VI: Inglis, Age 15—The Chiral Knights' Academy (6)

"Chancellor, my lord," Inglis said. "I apologize, but it's as you see. I was unable to capture the ambassador."

"Well... You didn't really have a choice in the matter. Well done." Even as the chancellor spoke, though, the ceiling and floor of the cabin rumbled and began to collapse. "Mm?! Now what?!"

Springing from the ceiling and the floor were dark, thick spikes that looked like insect legs upon which were solid gems. As the legs came forward, the next to be revealed was the body of a gigantic spider. Inglis was face to face with a giant spider with a hard, armor-like carapace.

"It's a magicite beast!" Chancellor Arcia yelled.

"But the Prism Flow didn't fall!" Rani said, confused. "And we're so far up in the sky!"

Leone turned to her friends. "Then it's the Steelbloods, isn't it?!"

Inglis nodded. "Yeah. The Steelbloods have Prism Powder, so they can create magicite beasts whenever they want." Rumors had been swirling around about today's business, and it seemed like the Steelbloods, too, would not remain silent.

"More and more are appearing!" Rafinha fired an arrow of light from her Artifact. It pierced the body of a spider magicite beast with a sickening *squelch*, and the beast stopped moving.

"Anyway, let's take them down!" Leone extended her dark sword Artifact and swept it through several of the beasts, smashing them.

The two were certainly powerful; these sorts of magicite beasts were no threat to them. Inglis decided to leave the fighting to them. After all, it wouldn't hurt to let Chancellor Arcia see Leone in action.

Inglis approached the chancellor and asked, "Your Excellency, what shall we do? Break off the exchange and escape?"

Arcia paused to think for a moment. "I'd prefer to complete the exchange, with a substitute if need be, but we have quite the mess on our hands to deal with first."

"Then, shall we go through the ship defeating the magicite beasts?"

"That would be helpful."

"Understood. However, wouldn't it be for the best if you evacuated the ship for a time?"

He stopped, considering that. “Yes, I suppose that would make it easier for you all to fight.”

“Then I propose we return to the Flygear Port.”

Just then, Rafinha and Leone, working together, finished off the first wave of enemies.

“Good idea! Let’s hurry, Chris!”

“When we finish these—!”

Inglis called over to the person who was the reason they were there in the first place. “Yeah. Then, Fars—”

“Yeah? What?”

“Are you still not ready? This seems like your chance.”

Fars was startled for a moment but quickly pulled himself together. “Ha ha. I see... I should’ve expected that. You’re right. It’s about time.”

“Huh? What do you mean, Chris?”

Leone was just as confused as Rafinha was. “What are you talking about?”

“Well, I mean—” Inglis began.

But before Inglis could finish, a frazzled man who seemed to be an official from Highland barged into the cabin.

“Ambassador! Ambassador Muenthe! Big trouble! The cargo from Rambach Company is full of magicite beasts! Gahhhhh!” He screamed as the sharp leg of a magicite beast thrust through his back. Next, another swarm of magicite beasts appeared in the cabin.

“No way... Fars, you—?!” Rafinha gasped.

“So you *were* with the Steelbloods!” Leone glared.

“Well, yes and no. This is my doing, but I have nothing to do with the Steelbloods. See?” Fars pulled back his bandana with one hand, revealing the stigmata on his forehead, the mark of a Highlander.

“A Highlander?! I guess you’re not lying about being separate from the Steelbloods, then,” Leone said. “After all, they oppose your country.”

Rafinha didn’t follow. “But why is a Highlander doing this to another Highlander?”

Inglis thought back on Fars’s earlier words. “So Highland really isn’t monolithic either.”

“Just out of curiosity...when did you notice?” he asked.

“The first time we met. I believe I invited you to fight?”

Suddenly, a new magicite beast charged at Inglis, its legs extending, ready to cut her into pieces.

Inglis caught the first leg without even looking, gave the creature a forceful heave, and sent it flying at Fars. It was a casual throw, but incredibly fast nonetheless.

However, Fars smashed it back toward Inglis practically without

moving. He, too, had extraordinary power.

Inglis continued. "But you pretended to be powerless, so I had my suspicions. I didn't imagine you were actually a Highlander, though." Inglis volleyed back the incoming magicite beast with a well-timed kick.

"Son of a— You saw through me from the beginning? And you just played along? You scheming little—" Once again, Fars smashed the magicite beast at her.

And Inglis returned the favor. Fars did as well. As they bounced the magicite beast back and forth, their conversation continued.

"I shall accept a challenge from anyone at any time, but I don't mean to force it onto others. I was just waiting for you to be ready."

In Inglis's mind, even if she won against someone who wasn't able to bring their power out, it would be boring. It'd be a waste. She wanted to fight on their terms, let them do what they wanted, clash against their full power, and still win. Only such a scenario could bring out her true potential. One must make the most of opportunities.

"I see—but I'm a Highlander knight, one of the few combat specialists," Fars explained. "You saved me the trouble of killing Muenthe, so as thanks, I'll try not to betray your expectations."

Gradually, the speed of the magicite beast volleys between them increased. Their fierce wills competed for victory.

"Thank you. I'll enjoy this."

Due to the momentum of Inglis's last shot, Fars's aim went wide. His kick sent the magicite beast through the wall and into the sky. "Ugh...! Guess I missed."

"We can't measure the superiority or inferiority of each other's strength like this. Go ahead, please attack." A smile drifted to Inglis's face.

A Highlander knight—that's what Fars had called himself. If that was true, she could expect him to be strong. If a Highlander knight was weaker than a knight from the surface, they wouldn't be able to oppress the surface. Being beaten with the very Artifacts they had sent down would be laughable. It would stand to reason that they had some kind of power to overcome surface forces. She looked forward to seeing it for herself.

"Look at you smiling happily. I'd love to see that beautiful face half-crying with fear," Fars threatened.

"You're right. I would too—if such a thing could happen."

"Then... How about this? Gate, release!" Space seemed to distort around Fars's clenched fist. In the blink of an eye, that distortion wrapped around them, and the scenery in front of their eyes changed. When Inglis and the others realized where they were, they were standing in a borderless space of sparkling yellow-green particles of

light.

“Is this...another dimension?” Inglis asked.

“It’s like the Labyrinth of Ordeals!” Rafinha said.

Leone’s focus was on other things. “More importantly, look around us! Magicite beasts are—!”

“There’s so many!” Chancellor Arcia cried.

An unbelievable number of magicite beasts swarmed around them—perhaps hundreds or nearly a thousand of them. They surrounded Inglis and the others, who stood in an area bathed in a pillar of pale light. Inglis concluded the pillar was a safe area where the magicite beasts couldn’t enter.

“Did the magicite beasts that appeared on the ship earlier come from here?!” Inglis hadn’t sensed them at all. When she and the others were on the Flygear Port, the magicite beasts must have been here, not existing in their own dimension yet. Unlike the Steelbloods’ method of creating magicite beasts with Prism Powder, the magicite beasts had been gathered here and then released.

“Exactly. It’s nasty to keep these beasts in here, though.”

“Meaning, you gathered them here to disguise this attack as the work of the Steelbloods?”

“Yeah. Their tactics are well-known. The stupid knights from before are too hasty. If you’re going to disguise something, you need to do it properly or you’ll fool no one. I’m cautious.”

Inglis began to see the full picture. “I see, so inviting us as guards must have been for that purpose too.”

“What do you mean, Chris?”

“He wants people to think we, connected to the Steelbloods, killed both Ambassador Muenthe and Chancellor Arcia to ruin the exchange.”

Leone paused. “I see. If I’m here, it becomes a lot more believable that we’re connected to the Steelbloods.”

“And if I’m here, it would be suspected that even Rafael was a Steelblood!” Rafinha gasped.

“Yeah. I think that’s his plan,” Inglis said. “A rather detestable scheme.”

“Yeah! It really is!” Leone’s expression became even more severe.

“You won’t get away with what you’ve done!” Rafinha said, glaring at Fars.

“That should be my line!” he yelled. “That isn’t the only reason I drew you in—I also want to take revenge for Rahl!”

As his words washed over them, Inglis and Rafinha shared a glance.

“For Rahl? I’m surprised he’s that popular.”

“You want revenge for someone like him? So greedy! You’re no

different from the ambassador before!”

“Hmph... You’ve got a lot of guts saying that about a boy in front of his father.”

“F-Father?!” Inglis and Rafinha both gasped in shock. They had questions: Was he Rambach? Was the change in the merchant company’s leadership also fake? Furthermore, how was he so young? He looked about the same age as Rahl.

“When I became a Highlander, I also got this new body...along with the obligations of a knight. My previous body was sick, falling apart, so what choice did I have? Anyway, he may have been a bad son, but he was *my* son! And you killed him! Of course I want revenge!”

“Why would you hate us?! He—!”

“Don’t just ignore your own failures in parenting!”

Inglis had to agree with Rafinha and Leone. “If you fight with hatred and grudges, it’ll only weigh your power down. You won’t enjoy it. I recommend having more fun and appreciating your strength all on its own.”

“I will—after I kill you all! I should tell you, now that you’re in here, you’re already trapped. This isn’t just a dimension for sealing away magicite beasts. It was originally an execution ground for surface knights like you! In this dimension, your Artifacts are worthless!” The grin that came to Fars’s face was like a menacing blade.

Rafinha checked her Artifact. “It’s true, I can’t make my arrows of light!”

“My sword won’t listen to me either!” Leone cried out.

“I see.”

This had to be Fars’s trump card. Inglis figured this was how Highlander knights could suppress forces from the surface.

“Maybe this...?” She converted aether into mana to create an ice sword—but before it could appear, her mana scattered, unable to be properly controlled. Fars was able to stop the use of Artifacts by disrupting and blocking the flow of mana. That held true for direct manipulation of mana without a Rune. “Looks like I’m no good either.”

“Yes...but I, possessing a stigmata, am different! Now, fall by my hand!” At Fars’s command, the pillar of light shrank, isolating only him. Inglis and the others, cast out of the light, were swarmed toward by the magicite beasts.

“Rani! Leone! Take care of the chancellor!”

“Got it!”

“We’ll figure something out!”

Trusting her friends, Inglis advanced on her own. An oppressive

number of magicite beasts swarmed around her. With this many, she couldn't underestimate them. Her best chance to keep everyone safe would be to beat Fars, who controlled the dimension, and escape.

"Haaaah!" Inglis rushed toward the nearest magicite beast and kicked it as hard as she could. Sent flying, it crashed precisely into the pillar of light surrounding Fars.

Snap!

With a harsh sound, the body of the magicite beast bounced away. There seemed to be no effect on the pillar of light.

"Ha ha ha ha! I've got front-row seats to your deaths! That won't work—"

Crrraaack!

With a rumbling sound, the pillar of light crumbled.

"What exactly won't work?" Inglis challenged, sheathed in the pale blue light of aether.

"Gwah?!"

She grabbed Fars by the throat with one hand and lifted him.

"Wh-What?! How did you—?!"

"I just hit it as hard as I could."

"What the hell... Does this dimension not affect you?!"

In response, Inglis smiled gently, like a beautiful maiden. To Fars, on the contrary, that expression was terrifying to behold. Inglis said she'd hit the pillar—but he hadn't seen her move at all.



“Oh, it does. But I possess a different kind of strength—other powers.”

Even if mana didn't work, if one had aether techniques, they could be used normally. This other dimension could not interfere with the flow of aether.

“Ugh... That's a load of crap. What other powers even—”

“Return us to our dimension—unless you'd like me to defeat you here and now. After all, Rani and Leone are hard-pressed.”

The two of them had somehow managed to take on the attacking magicite beasts and protect Chancellor Arcia, but without their Artifacts' powers, they were struggling. At this rate, they probably wouldn't hold out long. Inglis had to end things quickly.

Suddenly, a part of the swarm surrounding them was blown away. Something rose from beneath them.

“Wh-What?!” Rafinha shrieked.

“New foes? Give me a break!” Leone complained.

“Ho hyo! Ho hyo hyo hyo!”

A humanoid magicite beast—the Rune-Eater—stood in their way. Its Rune-studded body had grown into a low, bloated shape, with the sturdy hide and embedded gems of a magicite beast. From its chest grew the head of the Highland ambassador, Muenthe. The creature let out a large laugh.

Inglis gasped. “A magicite beast! But now it looks like...!”

The Rune-Eater had eaten Muenthe, and now the absorbed Muenthe had become a part of it, transforming with it. And that wasn't all...

“Ho hyo hyo hyo hyoooooooo!” The humanoid magicite beast, while letting out Muenthe's laugh, extended swords of ice from each of the fingers of its gigantic hands.

“It's using mana!” This dimension had no effect on Highlanders; Inglis guessed the Rune-Eater was using Muenthe's stigmata.

Next, the monster swung the blades at the spider magicite beasts around it, creating several magicite beast skewers. Then, just like when the Rune-Eater had devoured Muenthe, they turned to black coal and were absorbed. Could it absorb magicite beasts now that it was one itself?

Rafinha and Leone watched, frozen in place.

“Is that...cannibalism?!”

“It's so strong!”

It absorbed the many magicite beasts in the blink of an eye and transformed, its lower body growing spider legs, probably a result of eating so many spider magicite beasts. Abruptly, the other spider creatures began to scramble toward it. Did absorbing many of them

give the Rune-Eater the controlling power of a queen bee or queen ant?

"They're combining—" In no time at all, its lower body had completely taken on the form of a spider magicite beast.

The Rune-Eater's body and Runes...

Muenthe's face and stigmata...

And a spiderlike magicite beast's lower body...

This was no longer just a Rune-Eater, or a magicite beast, or a Highlander. It was a messy chimera. There was just one thing Inglis could say for sure—it seemed strong.

"An impressive chimera—I should have known you were concealing something like this. I'm starting to be impressed." Since the enemies had gathered together, she could take them on just herself. To be honest, she was just a little disappointed that this could only happen in this dimension.

But Fars denied it. "Th-That wasn't me! All I did was gather the magicite beasts!"

"Huh? Then what— I see, this time it really was Prism Powder..."

The Steelbloods really had launched an assault, albeit through a different route than Chancellor Arcia's knights or Fars had. If not, she had no explanation for why Leon was in the capital. The Prism Powder they'd piled up was now showing its effects here.

"So this situation is just a coincidence?" Inglis giggled. "I must really have the right daily routine."

"Sheesh, Chris! Don't be happy about that!"

"Yeah! That thing is really disgusting!"

Neither Rafinha nor Leone, gathered around Chancellor Arcia, were pleased.

"M-Maybe I have the right daily routine too!" Fars's body, still held up in one of Inglis's hands, distorted suddenly, disappearing along with his weight. "It's a pity that I can't watch from my front-row seat! Die there! I'll be back later to gather your corpses, if that monster doesn't devour you!" Only his voice echoed loudly around the scene. He'd left Inglis and the others behind, departing alone.

"Ah...! He's gone?!" Rafinha cried.

"He left us behind and ran away?!" Leone shouted.

"He must be avoiding the dimension crumbling in on him were he to lose."

"No way..." Rafinha turned to Inglis. "Can we get out on our own?!"

"What do you think, Inglis?" Leone asked. "Can you do what you did before?"

"If I destroy the dimension, we'll probably be fine. But before that —"

Maybe she could have some fun fighting the chimera.

“Ho hyo! Smells like Inglis! Inglisssssss! Become one with me! Becoming one feels sooooo good!” A tongue slurped forth from Muenthe’s face. Inglis wasn’t particularly surprised to see that frog-like tongue now that he was a magicite beast.

“That really is revolting.” Looking at it sent shivers down her spine.

“Of course it is! Hurry and beat that thing, Chris!”

“I don’t want to see its face for much longer,” Leone complained, grossed out.

“Mm-hm.” Inglis, alone, moved in front of the chimera that contained Muenthe. “Defeat me, and you can do whatever you’d like. Now, let’s begin!”

“Ho hyo hyo hyo hyo oooooh!” The tips of its countless spider legs transformed into blades of ice and swung toward Inglis. It was gigantic, but its movements were definitely not slow.

“Wh—?!”

Quite the opposite, they were very fast. The attack of each individual leg was fiercer than that of the original Rune-Eater, and the sheer number of attacks was beyond comparison. It was a barrage of ice swords. Even for Inglis, it would be difficult to break through from the front. The attacks were too precise. There was no gap she could slip through.

“It’s big, it’s nasty, and it’s fast!” Rafinha shouted.

Leone stuck with her, comforting her. “But it can’t hit Inglis! It’ll be okay!”

Inglis knew if she allowed herself to fall back, it would be impossible to make it through without being hit.

“Such movements—it’s like I’m seeing multiples of her!” Chancellor Arcia was overwhelmed as he tried to watch. Inglis wasn’t just fast—her movements were beautiful. Anyone watching would be swept off their feet by their brilliance. “Y-You can see just one of her?”

Rafinha nodded. “I can, more or less.”

“Well, I can barely see her,” Leone admitted.

Arcia stared at all three of them in awe. “It seems the knights’ academy is raising some truly talented people.”

Meanwhile, Inglis continued to avoid the chimera’s attacks by rotating clockwise around it, but falling back was boring—it lacked a certain artistry. She decided to prepare her counterattack.

“Ho hyoooooo! Pucker up, sweetheart!”

Inglis dodged a slash aimed for her neck while working her way behind and to the side of the chimera. The chimera shifted its body to face her in her new location, but it had a problem forming.

“Now!” Inglis yelled, leaping in the opposite direction. This placed her completely outside of its field of vision. Due to its large size, it couldn’t turn around quickly. She took advantage of that to attack while its guard was down.

“Ho hyo?” it muttered in a silly voice, having lost sight of Inglis.

“Haaaah!”

Thuuud!

“Gaaahhhh!”

Inglis’s kick pierced Muenthe’s face, twisting it hideously, but that was all it did. The face twisted, and the upper body swayed back, yet the countless spider legs tensed and stayed in place.

“He really is heavy...” she groaned. A normal magicite beast could be sent flying with a single kick. This was no normal monster—but that’s what made this interesting!

“Ho hyooo!” Struck strongly, it reacted quickly. Muenthe’s face, distorted from the kick, quickly stretched out its tongue and wrapped it around Inglis. It clung to her from her knees up her thighs, and to her chest.

“Ho hyo hyo hyo! So sweet, so soft!”

“Cease that at once. That’s vulgar.” Inglis formed her Aether Shell around herself. As she was wrapped in a pale blue light, Muenthe’s tongue was shredded and fell away.

“Aaaggghhh!”

“You were impressive nonetheless.” She hadn’t planned to use Aether Shell yet, but unable to use mana in this dimension, she’d had no choice. Aether techniques were a huge drain on her. When using it, she needed to keep fights short.

And she still had to escape this dimension and deal with Fars.

“Haaah!” Inglis landed after gaining some distance and this time rushed straight in.

“Ho hyo ho hyo ho hyo!” In response, the curtain of ice swords fell on her.

“I’m surprised you can move. I commend you.”

It deserved praise. Most couldn’t manage even a single step when faced with Inglis under the effects of Aether Shell.

“But it’s not enough!” Inglis responded to each of the falling blades with a punch.

“Gahhhh?!”

The result was as expected: the magicite beast legs, transformed into ice swords, fell like a curtain and shattered!

“Sh-She suddenly blew its legs off! What in the—?!” Arcia yelled.

“W-We’re just as shocked as you are!” Rafinha exclaimed.

“Yeah, they were blown off when they touched the blue light!” Leone said.

They never saw Inglis swing her fists. In an instant, the countless legs seemed to have been blown off. Before they knew it, the legless Muenthe’s giant form was rolling around.

“Looks like this is goodbye yet again.” Inglis discarded her Aether Shell and thrust her right palm at the writhing Muenthe.

Light swirled and converged around her hand. The vivid blue-white light grew into a giant clump as everyone watched.

“Aether Strike!”

Blammmmmmm!

“Ho hyoooooooooooo?!”

The gigantic ball of light swallowed Muenthe’s gigantic form.

Chapter VII: Inglis, Age 15—The Chiral Knights' Academy (7)

"All finished." Inglis gave a nod of approval as Muenthe disappeared in the light of the Aether Strike. Even after firing one at full strength, she still had a bit of power left. Her endurance was growing slowly but steadily.

Her friends and the chancellor rushed to her side.

"I knew you could do it, Chris! That was amazing!" Rafinha cheered.

"I knew you were great, but not *that* great!" Leone said.

"Yeah, but honestly," Inglis said, "I wish I could have taken my time fighting it. A tough opponent like that is good for training."

No matter what onlookers saw of the fight, Inglis knew that Rune-Eater had definitely been strong. She'd had to settle things quickly due to the circumstances, but she'd wanted to take her time.

"Whaaat? How could you possibly spend that much time looking at it without throwing up?" Rafinha asked, still grossed out.

"Ugh..." Leone groaned. "That thing was creepy before *and* after becoming a magicite beast."

"True, but who cares so long as it's strong?" Inglis wondered whether she should've fought with her eyes closed. At least then she wouldn't have had to stare at such a repulsive magicite beast for so long.

"Just what *are* you...?" Arcia asked in awe. "Not even a holy knight or a hial menace has such power."

"I'm simply a squire. See?" Inglis flashed the Runeless backs of her hands.

"Well, I see that now...but there's something more to you..."

"Anyway, let's focus on how to get out of this dimension. We don't know what's going on outside, so..."

"Ah, yes... But how—"

Before the chancellor could finish his sentence, their surroundings immediately transformed, twisting in front of their eyes. Before they knew it, they were aboard Highland's ship once again.

Rafinha gasped. "We're back?! Chris, what did you do?"

"Uh, I didn't do anything."

"Ahh! Look!" Leone shouted, her eyes glued to Fars. A sword had pierced his abdomen, and blood was dripping from the blade.

Gripping the handle was a man wearing a coat and a mask, dressed in black.

"It's the man in the black mask from the Steelbloods!" Rafinha cried, tensing as soon as she saw him.

"What?! Then he's—" Leone started, just for Inglis to cut her off and answer.

"Yes, he's the Steelbloods' leader."

They all understood now why the other dimension had disappeared; Fars's wounds were too great. There was no mistaking that fatal blow. Otherwise, it would not have collapsed.

"Gah... Ughhh..." Fars slumped to the floor.

The masked man turned to the group. "Inglis Eucus, what a coincidence meeting you here."

"How in the world did you get here?" she asked.

Did he disguise himself as someone and infil—

"That's how." He pointed behind himself. His back was to the hull of the ship, which had mostly been smashed in. Inglis took a good look at it.

The hull was completely broken apart. It hadn't looked like that when Fars had trapped Inglis and the others. But there was something else—staring at the sky beyond, the view clearer from the destroyed hull, they all saw a gigantic flying ship.

The three girls were shocked.

"Wha...?!"

"Huuuh?!"

"That thing's—"

It was as huge as the one they were standing on, with additional cannon ports all around the sides. Inglis inferred those cannons were responsible for the destruction of Highland's ship.

"Preposterous! Not even our country has something of that magnitude! How?!" Chancellor Arcia cried.

If the Steelblood Front had something like that, then they were more than a small guerrilla organization. What kind of reach did they possess? It was unnerving. If they wanted to, they could take out an entire country.

"Never mind the details. We just have to beat them here!" Leone unslung her dark greatsword Artifact.

The masked man wasn't close, but in an instant Leone extended her blade and attacked him.

Clang!

However, with a single hand, he easily deflected Leone's full-force attack. "Stop that. You have no hope of defeating me as you are now."

“Silence! What happened to my brother, Leon?! You deceived him!”

As Leone continued with a fierce string of slashes, the black-masked man parried each of them with a hand.

“That’s not true. My comrade Leon would have stood up with or without me. I’m not the sort of man who *could* deceive him—he’s unshakable to the core. We’ve only joined forces because we look at the world in the same way.”

“Shut up! Don’t talk like you know him!”

“Well, well...”

Clannnnngggg!

The masked man drew his own sword, striking Leone’s.

“Ah—?!” The shock of the blow made Leone’s greatsword fall from her hands and roll on the floor.

“I’ll warn you. If you continue to attack me, I’ll respond in kind. I have my own objectives here.”

“Ugh...! Your threats won’t scare me off!” Without hesitating, Leone reached for her Artifact, but Inglis softly took her hand and stopped her from picking it up.

“Wait, Leone. Leave the rest to me. I’m worried about you, and—”

“And you want to fight him?”

“You could tell?”

“Of course. You’ve got a huge grin on your face. Didn’t you realize?”

“Oh, whoops.”

“It’s fine. I think I need your help on this one. Please—I leave it to you.”

“Okay. I’ve got it.” Inglis advanced toward the masked man. “It seems this day has arrived earlier than I expected.”

“Let me ask you one thing: where is Highland’s ambassador, Muenthe? I have no time to idly spar without vanquishing him first.”

“He’s gone. I defeated him.”

“Oh my! That saves me some effort. Farewell, then—though, I suppose you have no intention of letting me go.”

“Correct. If you escape, I’ll even board your ship, and I don’t know that it’ll survive in the process.”

“That would be inconvenient.”

Boooom!

A loud explosion rang through the ship, rocking it unsteadily.

“Eeek?!” Rafinha shrieked.

“What happened?” Leone asked, looking around.

Inglis felt the floor tilt heavily under her feet. “We’re swaying quite a bit.”

The blast was followed by a second, then a third, accompanied by sudden swings of the ship from side to side.

The man in the black mask looked outside. “There appears to have been an accident.”

The Steelbloods’ ship was gaining altitude—or that’s how it seemed at first. The truth was the opposite.

“We’re falling?!” Rafinha yelled.

“This is bad! The capital’s below us!” Leone warned.

They were right. Such irony—the offering had taken place over the capital as a countermeasure against the Steelbloods, yet here the group was with its own flying ship, easily interfering in matters. Leaders in the capital couldn’t have known this would happen. If the ship fell on the capital directly below, it would be a catastrophe. The capital’s plan had completely backfired.

Leone focused her attention on the mysterious Steelblood leader. “Did you—?!”

“I gave no such orders.” The masked man shook his head.

But at the same time, Fars, collapsed and bleeding, leaped to his feet forcefully. The wound piercing his chest was clearly fatal, but he’d used the last of his power to fight back. He thrust the sword clenched in his bloodstained hands at Leone, who was standing just beside him.

“Dieeeee!”

“Wh—?!”

Just before his sword pierced Leone, who was caught off-guard, a beast with a body of crackling lightning leaped at him from the side. The lightning beast slammed Fars away from Leone with its body before wrapping around him.

And the beast exploded.

Boooom!

Fars, already fatally injured, was scorched and torn up. “Dammit... But the engines...are already blown... Go down with the ship for all I care!” This time for real, Fars fell unconscious for the last time, dying with a glare fixed on Inglis and the others to the end.

“Leone!” Inglis yelled.

“Are you okay?!” Rafinha called.

“Yeah... That was Leon’s—!” She whirled her head around to the masked man. “D-Did you do that?!”

His response was blunt. “Beats me.”

Next, Leone turned to Inglis, who shook her head. "It wasn't me."
"Then you really are—!"

A Flygear suddenly swooped toward the ship, as if to blot out her voice. At its controls was the Steelbloods' hial menace, Sistia. "We've taken out the Highlanders aboard the ship, but someone destroyed its engines and it's out of control! It's going to crash! Hurry and get out of there!"

"Very well. If we can't seize it, sticking around for long is pointless. Our losses could be great." The masked man looked toward the Steelbloods' ship, which was surrounded by royal Flygear Ports and Flygears. The assigned forces on guard had already noticed something was wrong and gone into action. Among them, presumably, were cadets from the knights' academy, pressed into service due to low manpower. Maybe even Liselotte and the others were there.

"Perhaps, in a way, this was fortunate," the masked man said to Inglis. "In this situation, there's no way you can chase me, right? If this ship was sound, I'd have been unable to avoid battle. And I don't wish to fight you."

Inglis did not spring into Sistia's Flygear to pursue him; he was right. She was still disappointed, though. She pouted. "I consider it a pity."

"Hmph... Normally I would stay and help, but I'm sure you'll manage something. I leave the rest to you. Let's go, Sistia."

"Understood!"

The Flygear soared off—and with it, the man in black and his group.

"Brother!" Leone called. "Leon, was that you?"

"Well, he *did* help you, Leone," Inglis said after a careful pause. "But I'm not really sure that was Leon. Perhaps his power can replicate Leon's."

Inglis could tell he was more skilled than she was in the precise control of aether, but there was no way he had recreated the ability of Leon's Artifact through converting aether to mana. "More importantly, we need to escape quickly!"

"Yeah. If the ship can't be controlled, we need to get outside and stop it," Rafinha said.

At the very least, they couldn't let it fall in the capital. If they did, there would be major losses.

Leone, too, changing her mood, nodded. "Yeah, let's hurry!"

As they steeled themselves, two more Flygears arrived after the one that had just escaped.

"Heeey! Inglis!"

"Father! Are you all right?!"

Lahti manned the controls of one with Pullum as a passenger, and

the other carried Liselotte, piloted by the twins, Ban and Ray.

“Lahti! Good timing,” Inglis said.

“Ooh, isn’t that Liselotte!” Leone said.

Lahti raised his voice over the Flygear. “Get in! We’ll get you out of there!”

“Father, please hurry and board!” Liselotte urged.

Inglis, Rafinha, and Leone boarded Lahti’s Flygear, leaving Chancellor Arcia to Liselotte’s.

“Hurry and get His Excellency somewhere safe,” Inglis instructed. “We’ll stop the ship.”

“Okay, understood!” Liselotte said.

“I’m counting on you! Don’t let it fall on the city!”

Inglis and the others nodded to Chancellor Arcia. “Of course!”

“But how do we deal with this huge thing?” Lahti was already struggling with the controls, as his Flygear was over capacity at five passengers.

Inglis had a plan. “Lahti, bring us below the ship.”

“Okay!”

The flying ship was spewing smoke from its engine compartment as it fell toward the capital directly below. Fortunately, it hadn’t completely lost buoyancy, so they were able to get the Flygear underneath it, but—

Boooom!

There was another explosion. The ship shook, and something large tumbled from its deck.

Rafinha watched it descend. “Ah...! The Flygear Port loaded with cargo!”

“Oh no! It’s falling too!”

“Leave it to me!”

Even if they managed to stop the ship, the Flygear Port crashing into the city would be no small matter. Inglis, unhesitating, leaped into the sky.

Rafinha, Leone, and Lahti all yelled at her stunt in shocked dismay.

“Chris?!”

“Inglis! That’s unreasonable!”

“Hey! What are you doing?!”

Despite their cries, Inglis soared downward toward the Flygear Port.

“There!” She let loose an Aether Strike.

Blammmmm!

Enveloped in pale blue light, the Flygear Port disappeared. Meanwhile, the recoil from the Aether Strike sent Inglis flying back to Lahti's Flygear.

"I'm back!"

"Aha ha ha... Welcome back, Chris."

Lahti couldn't believe his eyes. "You surprised me, suddenly jumping out."

"Absurd, as usual," Leone said.

"I-Inglis, that was amazing!" Pullum added.

However, they had addressed the problem of the falling cargo only; they still needed to do something about the ship itself.

"What are you gonna do, Inglis?! Can you use that ball of light to blow away the ship too?" Lahti asked.

Inglis shook her head. "Well, that would be a bit tough..."

She knew that shooting Aether Strike at a cargo-laden Flygear Port was one thing, but she didn't have enough power to destroy a huge ship. If she tried the same technique, it would probably just pierce the ship, splitting the ship into lots of debris. If that rained down on the capital, it would make the situation even worse. Moreover, having already shot two Aether Strikes today, she was unsure if she could shoot a third. Even if she could, it would probably be less powerful than her previous.

"Th-Then what do we do?!" Lahti panicked.

"Bring us close to the ground so that I can see where it's likely to crash."

If it was going to crash into an empty lot or open space, they could leave it be. On the other hand, if it was going to crash into a shopping or residential district, they would need to stop it or change its course.

Rafinha understood. "So we can just leave it alone if it's going to fall somewhere safe?"

"Exactly, Rani. It might crash into the lake instead."

"Inglis, if it really will hit the city, what do we do?" Leone asked.

"We either stop it from crashing or we redirect it. Neither will work from the air, so we'll need to land regardless."

"Okay, got it," Lahti said.

Even Pullum, who was normally calm, had an expression of intense focus. "If we call for evacuations now, we may be able to get people to safety in time!"

"All right! Taking her down at full speed!" Lahti descended toward the surface at a tremendous velocity. With his innate sense of aeronautics, he predicted the point of impact—and it wasn't good. "Looks like it's going to crash here!"

"This is a bad place." Rafinha grimaced.

"The *worst* place," Leone agreed.

Inglis remained resolute. "We absolutely need to do something about it!"

In front of them was *the* center of the center of the capital—the royal palace. The falling ship would strike it dead center, and its smoking form was getting closer and closer.

"Hey, hurry, run away! Something big's gonna crash!" Lahti shouted to the gatekeepers. The panicking soldiers began to rush off, each in their own direction. Soon, chaos spread through the palace.

"Keep calling out to them," Inglis instructed. "We'll get off. Let's go, Rani, Leone." She jumped down in front of the palace gates.

Rafinha and Leone followed.

"Okay, Chris!"

"Yeah! Let's go!"

"Me too!" another girl's voice said. Pullum moved to hop out.

Lahti immediately yanked her back. "Not you!"

"Why'd you stop me? I want to help too!"

"You can do that without getting off! Just stay aboard!"

"But they all know it's dangerous, and that didn't stop them..."

"It's fine!" Inglis said from below. "Lahti's probably worried about you, so stay there with him for his sake."

"Wow! Really, Lahti?"

"Ugh, be quiet! This is no time to chat!"

As Inglis and the others decided what to do, many other Flygears gathered around as well. Lahti and Pullum departed, and Inglis called out to the new pilots and passengers. "Everyone, help the people evacuate!"

"Okay, got it!" one person replied. The assembled Flygears all dispersed.

With that underway, now Inglis just needed to do something about the falling ship.

"Lahti and Pullum are so cute together. Ahhh, having a boyfriend sounds nice..." Rafinha said.

"Absolutely not," Inglis retorted. "You're too young for that."

"Why are you two talking about boyfriends?! What are we going to do about that thing?!" Leone yelled, exasperated.

"Well, Chris said there's a way to save everyone, so we'll probably manage something. Right, Chris?"

"Yeah." Inglis turned to Leone. "Plus, we've got you here with us."

"Me? What for?"

"Even if we try to stop it, it'll hit the palace before we can reach it, right? So if we can hit it a little above and make it fall there..." Inglis pointed toward a pier at the far end of the palace grounds. A

canal stretched from the lake so that it could be accessed directly from the palace. Compared to letting the ship crash into the castle and the houses nearby, dropping it into a waterway would be far less disastrous.

“You want me to hit it? Oh, if I extend my sword...!”

“Exactly. Can you make your sword as big as possible? That way it’ll be easier to blow the ship off course.”

“If we use our combined strength...” Rafinha said.

Leone was hesitant. “My power won’t be enough, though...”

“But the three of us together might be enough. After all, Chris has superhuman strength!”

“The two of you have Artifacts, so you’re plenty extraordinary,” Inglis said.

“Anyway, let’s go!” Leone tightly gripped her sword Artifact, and the blade widened and extended rapidly. “This is as far as it goes! I wish I could do more, but...!” It was as wide as several adults with their arms outstretched, and it was long enough to reach the roof of the castle.

However...to smash away a ship of that size, I’d want to commandeer something larger, Inglis thought.

“Leave it to me!” Pullum called.

Still in Lahti’s Flygear, Pullum’s Artifact did not take the shape of a weapon; it was a glimmering silver harp. When she plucked the strings, there was a beautiful flowing melody, and Leone and Rafinha’s Artifacts were wrapped in a thin sheen of light. The tones of Pullum’s Artifact seemed to enhance the capabilities of other nearby Artifacts, making it useful for support. Rafinha, who was also in the knights’ course with Pullum, had mentioned it before, but this was the first time Inglis had seen it directly.



“Thanks! Now I can do more!” Leone said, energized.

The length and breadth of her sword swelled again, to nearly double what it had been. And she herself, swinging the sword, must have become stronger as well. The same went for Rafinha. While it didn’t have the same effect on Inglis, who didn’t have an Artifact, she was still grateful that Rafinha and Leone had been strengthened.

“It’s almost here. Rani, Leone, are you ready?”

The ship was already closing in.

“Yeah, I’m good.”

“Yes. Let’s go!”

Inglis and Rafinha each gripped the hilt of Leone’s now-gigantic sword. Perhaps as another effect of Leone’s Gift, they could barely feel the weight of the massive dark Artifact. They could put all their force into deflecting the falling ship.

The three, breathing in unison, lifted the sword high in the air. Then, aiming not the blade’s edge but its central ridge toward their target, they waited a brief moment. The shadow of the gigantic ship, spewing smoke and emitting a screeching noise, soon washed over them.

Inglis took the lead. “Here it is! Now!”

Rafinha and Leone followed. “Here we go!”

“Yeah! One, two!”

“Haaaaaaaah!” they screamed in unison.

Screeeeee!

Sparks flew as the blade of the dark sword impacted the prow of the falling ship. Their arms fiercely strained against the blow. They gritted their teeth and planted their feet, but their entire bodies were pushed backward, leaving trails on the ground.

“Grrr...! Maybe it is a little too heavy!” Rafinha grunted.

“We’re getting dragged along! At this rate...!” Leone frowned at the weight.

Even if the two of them were strengthened by Pullum’s Artifact, deflecting the huge ship may have been too much.

Unless something else was done.

“I suppose I don’t have much of a choice.” Glittering aether sparkled along Inglis’s body thanks to her activated Aether Shell.

Up until now, she had been gripping the sword bare-handed. Wielding a weapon while swathed in aether would destroy it with the aether’s force; Artifacts were no exception—at least lower- and middle-class ones. Leone’s was an upper-class Artifact, and could maybe endure it. Inglis would rather not take that risk if she could

help it, but the priority needed to be on people's safety. This was no time to hold back.

"I'll give it all I have left!"

She only had a little aether remaining, but she forced everything she could out in one go. Her feet, which had been sliding backward from the momentum of the ship pushing on the blade, came to a stop. The dark sword, encased in aether, resisted the falling ship. Its prow began to twist, and the shrieking sound became even more intense.

"I-It's working! I knew you could do it, Chris!" Rafinha said.

"Let's keep pushing!" Leone cheered.

"Yeah! One more!"

But that push was just barely out of reach. Inglis had fought a long series of battles and used Aether Strike twice. She was ready to drop from exhaustion, and she definitely wasn't at her usual full power. She came to the painful realization that her lack of endurance meant she had to train that much harder.

"I'll assist you as well!" Someone with bright white wings descended from the heavens, a halberd Artifact in her hands. She was a beautiful young woman with voluminous bright blonde hair.

Liselotte had activated her Gift.

"Liselotte?!" Inglis was surprised. If they were overwhelmed, the ship would crush them. This was life-threatening. Liselotte was clearly brave if she chose to get herself involved now.

"I've already escorted my father to a safe place, so—!" Liselotte was the next to grip the hilt of Leone's dark sword. She, too, was strengthened by the effect of Pullum's artifact. And that strength was the last bit of help they needed.

They gave a resounding cry. "Heave-ho!"

Crrrraaack!

Winning the test of strength, the dark sword Artifact completed its swing. The huge ship was repelled, and—as they'd aimed—fell into the canal, producing a huge waterspout. The water fell in a drizzle on their heads.

A wave of cheers arose from the onlookers. "Whoaaa!"

"Is this a dream?! I've seen something absurd!"

"A-Amazing! You're amazing!"

"It's a miracle! Wonderful work!"

"Inglis! Everyone! That was amazing! Well done!" Lahti cheered, his eyes gleaming.

"Lahti's right! That really was amazing!" Pullum was in awe too.

"Phew... We pulled it off somehow. I'm a bit tired." Inglis took a deep breath. She'd used her aether to the limit. She was exhausted.

“For real! My arms are at their limit! They’re gonna fall off!” Rafinha held up her quivering arms.

Leone laughed, doing the same. “Mine too. But this was *truly* good.”

“I’m glad I made it in time.” Liselotte nodded, satisfied.

Rafinha squeezed her hand tightly and smiled at her. “Thanks, you saved us! I was wrong about you!”

“No, you weren’t mistaken. I was certainly shortsighted—” Liselotte turned to Leone and bowed her head deeply. “Father told me about what happened. I apologize for being suspicious of you. Please forgive my earlier rudeness.”

“Oh...? Ah... Mm, it’s okay. Don’t worry about me.” Leone looked quite startled—even flustered.

“Liar. She cried at night, didn’t she, Chris?”

“I saw. I hugged her for so long. I used to do that for Rani too. Those were good times.”

Rafinha and Leone both blushed intensely. “S-Stop that!” they yelled at Inglis.

“Anyway, I really am sorry,” Liselotte said. “Also, perhaps we can go back to our original dorm assignments? If you’re fine with it, that is.”

“Oh! Yes, I’d be glad to!” Leone gave a broad smile.

“Wow! Isn’t that nice, Leone?” Rafinha clapped her hands happily.

“Yes! Rafinha’s snoring made it a bit hard to sleep...”

Rafinha gasped in surprise.

“Yeah, if you’re not used to it...” Inglis nodded in agreement.

“Aha ha ha... That’s kind of rude. But you certainly do seem to be interesting people,” Liselotte said.

Crrraaack!

Something snapped, interrupting their casual conversation.

“What?! My Artifact—” Cracks opened across Leone’s dark sword artifact, and it shattered into several pieces.

“Ahh, what’s—?!” Leone gasped.

“I-It must have been too much for it?” Rafinha guessed. “It was really heavy...”

“Sorry, Leone. This was my fault—since I gave it my full power,” Inglis said.

“Huuuh?! Really?”

“I’m really sorry, I know how important it was to you.”

“Inglis... It’s fine. Don’t worry about it. You did what you had to do,” Leone said, her smile radiating warmth.

Chapter VIII: Inglis, Age 15—The Hial Menace's Sickness (1)

"An order each of Bolognese, gratin, and paella! Sorry about the wait!"

"Thanks!" Inglis and Rafinha received their orders with wide smiles on their faces. They were grabbing food in the knights' academy cafeteria. Inglis and everyone else who had already finished their first serving had asked the middle-aged woman working in the cafeteria for seconds.

"You have such healthy appetites. I can make a lot more, so eat up and get strong!"

"Of course!" Answering in unison, they returned to their seats.

Leone was seated at the same table. "You always eat such absurd amounts... And it's so early," she said, half-astounded.

"I... I don't know how you fit so much in. It's unbelievable."

Liselotte's eyes widened as she stared in shock.

Lahti and Pullum were just as surprised.

"Those two eat so much, yet they don't get fat."

"In a way, I'm jealous..."

"Honestly, I overeat the smallest bit, and I immediately get meaty, yet..." Leone, who seemed to put on weight easily, enviously watched her friends fill their bellies.

"Really? Personally, I'd rather a bit more meat on me. Especially here." Rafinha patted her chest. "C'mon, Leone, tell me. How do I get them to be bigger?"

"I-I want to know too!" Pullum, who had a figure like Rafinha's, also latched onto that line of thought. Liselotte's body type was somewhere in between theirs, so she just listened quietly.

"I, uh, I don't know. It kind of happened without me realizing it..." As Leone became flustered, Rin nested along her neckline.

"Lucky... I'd like to try trading places for once," Rafinha said.

"If you ate like that with my body, you'd be incredibly fat in no time," Leone retorted.

Rafinha turned back to Inglis. "So Chris, who's got an impressive figure *and* doesn't get fat no matter what, is the strongest?"

"Wha—?! Don't touch my chest like you just get to anytime, Rani!"

"It's fine! I'm just jealous!"

“Sheesh, I’ve told you, at least save it for the bath—”

“Oh! Meaning, from now on in the bath, I can feel your chest as much as I want?”

“Absolutely not!”

Leone cut in, laughing. “Aha ha ha... But is it okay to eat that much? Aren’t we meeting up with Rafael after this?”

Leone was right. There were no classes that day, so they’d made plans to see Rafael in the city. Some time had passed since the Highland offering incident, and Rafael had recently returned to the capital. The transportation of the Prismer’s corpse to the neighboring country’s border had succeeded with no real problems. If they were meeting him, it was almost certain that he’d end up feeding them.

The two agreed in unison, naturally. “Yeah. So we’re only eating up to about thirty percent.”

“Th-This is *thirty* percent?” Leone gawked.

“If you eat that much, food must be expensive,” Lahti said.

Rafinha nodded. “It’s pretty pricey. When we traveled from the countryside to the capital, we ate too much and ran out of money on the way.”

“Indeed we did,” Inglis said.

“Thanks to the principal, we can eat all we want at the cafeteria,” Rafinha said, “but it won’t last forever, and once the all-you-can-eat is over, we’ll probably be asking Rafael for lunch money, huh?”

“Unfortunately, it seems that way.”

“Ahh. I wish we were able to get some kind of fabulous reward for our work the other day.”

“But there’s no way we can,” Leone said. “Officially, nothing happened, right?”

“Yeah. Seems like it.” Inglis nodded in agreement.

Officials explained the trouble at the offering, which occurred when Rafael and the other regular knights were away, as “an unknown accident causing the Highland ship to crash.” Chancellor Arcia’s subordinates had mutinied and made an attempt on Highland Ambassador Muenthe’s life, and Muenthe himself had set the Rune-Eater, which was the result of his experiments, free in the capital to prey on innocent knights at night. Both were problems which would deteriorate the countries’ working relationship. If the truth came out, military clashes would not be unexpected. Neither Highland nor Karelia wanted that.

Furthermore, writing off the trouble as a Steelblood Front plot, as was done with Rahl, would be difficult this time. If Chancellor Arcia and the knights on duty had allowed the Steelbloods to assassinate an ambassador, they would have to be held responsible. Therefore, treating the incident as nothing more than an accident was the logical

solution.

However, because of that, Inglis and the others could not be publicly rewarded for having stopped the ship from crashing into the royal palace. With the public story characterizing the event as an accident, officials were claiming the ship had never been on a course to crash there. If anyone in a position of authority were to casually mention Inglis and the others, unknown sources would interrogate those students, possibly endangering them of unjust suspicion. That went all the more so with Leone among them; it was easy to imagine her being subjected to such misgivings. Thus, writing off the crash as nothing was the safest course.

Still, it was unrealistic to have absolutely no response, so Inglis and the others were invited to a party, held at the royal palace soon. Today, they planned to select the dresses that they'd wear there. Because they were all lacking in funds, Rafael offered to pay for them.

"All right, Chris, Leone, it's about time to get going," Rafinha said, signaling that they should be off. "The shop is in the capital, so I'm sure we'll have way better things to see there than we did in Ymir. Exciting, isn't it?"

"Absolutely. I can't wait," Inglis said, still a fan of dressing up.

"I'm surprised you're not interested in romance, but you like fashion, Inglis," Leone said.

"I enjoy it because I feel good seeing myself in nice clothes. Self-satisfaction is important."

"I...I see..."

"Chris looks good in anything, so it's fun to dress her up! All right, let's go!" Rafinha said, excited.

Inglis, Rafinha, and Leone left the campus of the knights' academy and waited for Rafael in front of the lesser-used back gate.

But it wasn't Rafael who appeared after a short time.

"Oh...! Hey, everyone!"

"It's been a while."

It was the two hial menaces, Ripple and Eris.

"Hello, Ripple. Hello, Eris. It's a pleasure to see you after so long." Inglis curtsied politely to the pair. It was her first time in years seeing Eris, and it brought back memories.

"Yes. Three years have passed, I believe? You've gotten so beautiful," Eris said. "You were still young then, but now you're all grown up."

"Thank you. It seems like you haven't changed at all," Inglis replied.

"I suppose. I am a hial menace, after all."

Inglis had heard hial menaces were long-lived. Indeed, even after several years, Eris's appearance hadn't changed at all; she was

still beautiful and resembled a young woman just under twenty years old. Compared to the fifteen-year-old Rafinha and Leone, Eris seemed somewhat more mature, but she looked around the same age as Inglis, who appeared mature for her age.

Rafinha and Leone also gave polite curtsies.

“Good to see you again!” Rafinha said.

“Hello!” Leone said.

Ripple turned a charming smile to Inglis. “I heard all about you and what happened during the recent offering to Highland! Seems like you all did a really good job! Really, it should have been us dealing with that. Thanks for working so hard!”

“I’d like to thank you as well,” Eris said.

“No. We had taken on a separate mission as guards, so we were simply doing our duty,” Inglis insisted. “And I might not have had the chance to fight if you had been there.”

Under the watchful glare of a hial menace and the holy knight Rafael, Arcia’s subordinates probably wouldn’t have acted rashly; Ambassador Muenthe may have refrained from allowing the activities of his Rune-Eater; and the Steelbloods may have taken a more guarded approach and chosen to stay in the shadows. Meaning, Inglis felt it was likely that things would have gone quite differently.

“I got some good experience because of what happened. Thank you.”

“Wow. You haven’t changed at all—you still absolutely love fighting,” Eris said.

In response, Inglis flashed a cute smile. “Of course. If it’s possible, I’d be happy to celebrate our reunion with a match. Shall we spar again?”

“Not here! People will think we’re weird!”

“Ha ha ha. Good ol’ Inglis!” Ripple said.

Interrupting the conversation, Inglis quickly shot up her right hand.

Thwap!

She gripped a shining, thick blade, blocking the sudden attack from overhead. The attack was from somewhere she couldn’t have possibly seen, but she had sensed it and reacted nonetheless. Next was the heavy thud of something big landing—the attacker had jumped down from above.

The others all had surprised reactions. “Huh?!”

“F-From where?!”

“Ch-Chris, wh-what’s happening?!”

“I was just in the mood for someone to attack me. Thank you,”

Inglis said.

Inglis turned to face her attacker. They looked strange, sort of humanlike but not in a form she was familiar with at all. The figure was a giant with a bluish-black hide, with the ears and tail of a beast, and about twice her size. Studded over their body were hard gemlike things—a clear indicator of a magicite beast; Inglis could recognize them at a glance. The giant's gems were blue, and their body was covered with a piercing cold fog, which made Inglis deduce that this magicite beast had fairly strong ice elemental powers. Each hand grasped a giant hatchet-like sword with a thick blade.

“Huh? You aren't Rafael,” she said, surprised. She'd expected Rafael had leaped in at her unannounced. Instead, she was staring at a completely unrelated magicite beast—not just that, but one with a human form, ears and tail aside.

“My brother would never do that!” Rafinha insisted.

“I thought maybe he was being generous.”

While Inglis was facing Rafinha, the giant swung their sword down from Inglis's blind spot, but without even looking, she blocked it as if it were nothing. She then proceeded to pull the beast in by the arm and immobilize them.

“No way. But more importantly, what's with that thing?” Rafinha asked. “Is that a humanoid magicite beast?!”

Leone was just as shocked. “Meaning—Highlanders?!”

On the surface, the Prism Flow turned animals into magicite beasts, which then attacked humans. Normally, the Prism Flow didn't affect humans, but Highlanders were susceptible. Inglis had already seen that for herself several times. Nonetheless, for one to suddenly appear was obviously an exceptional circumstance. In the first place, the Prism Flow wasn't falling where they were now.

“No, it's a demihuman magicite beast,” Ripple explained. “The Prism Flow does affect demihumans... Though it's different for me, because I'm a hial menace.”

Ripple was a demihuman, with doglike ears and tail. Inglis didn't know how hial menaces were created, but Ripple seemed to consider the beast one of her own. Her eyes, trained on the giant, were full of compassion and sorrow.

“Another one's appeared, then. Well, we can't let it loose.” Eris drew a stern frown.

“Another? You two know something about this?” Inglis asked.

“Ever since we returned to the capital, magicite beasts have suddenly been appearing from somewhere,” Eris replied. “I'm not sure why, but it's happened more than a few times.”

“Anyway, we've gotta beat any magicite beast that shows up. That's our job.” Ripple's expression became empty. Her face flushed,

as if blood was rushing to her head. She looked sick, like she had a cold.

Inglis wasn't sure if hial menaces could catch colds, though. "Ripple, are you okay? You don't seem like you're feeling well."

"Mm, i-it's fine. I'll feel better soon."

"For years, she's been like this when a magicite beast suddenly appears. Though I don't know why," Eris added.

"And if we defeat the beast?" Inglis asked.

"I suppose that may help. Previously, she's gone back to herself."

"I see. In that case..." Inglis pushed back the beast she'd pulled in earlier. Demihumans often boasted an imposing physique, but she sent it tumbling back to the ground without any tricks.

"You've got some arms, Inglis!" Ripple cheered.

"It's just brute force," Eris said. "She looks like a skinny little thing, and yet..."

As the two hial menaces spoke, Inglis quickly converted some of the aether swirling around her into mana. As she manipulated it, she formed a sword made from ice.

"I'll defeat it. Allow me one moment," Inglis remarked casually as she turned her azure blade toward the beast. "Haaah!" Inglis stepped toward the giant and thrust the ice sword toward their barrel-like chest. Her speed was incredible, and the magicite beast took the blow without being able to take a single step.

Clang!

Alongside a clear, hard sound, the magicite beast bent backwards. The force of Inglis's thrust had twisted the giant's body—but the tip of the sword was repelled, and it had chipped slightly. The magicite beast's chest was left with only a faint scratch. With Inglis's speed and power, it would have made sense for the sword to pierce it in one blow.

One thing in particular had weakened her attack.

"Chris! Elements, remember your elements!" Rafinha shouted.

This magicite beast's gems were blue, meaning the giant resisted ice mana. Red indicated a resistance to fire Artifacts, and green was strong against wind Artifacts. Those with gems of multiple colors on their bodies were superior varieties that could withstand multiple types of elements. Therefore, when knights fought magicite beasts, the standard tactic was to bring groups with a variety of elements and use Artifacts from an element to which the beast was not resistant. Rafinha's Light element and Leone's Dark element were rare higher-tier elements, and very few magicite beasts were strong against them. Thus, people with those elements could be described as second only to

holy knights.

The sword Inglis had created wasn't an Artifact, but it was an ice elemental. Therefore, the blue gems reduced the power behind her blade.

"Yeah, Rani. I know."

Even if only a little bit, her foe was hurt. Since she'd had the opportunity, she'd wanted to see what would happen if she attacked a magicite beast with its own element. Would her attack be completely negated by the same element? Or would it be severely reduced in power, but still work to some extent? The answer was the latter.

"If you know, you should attack with a different element—" Rafinha began.

"No," Inglis interrupted. "See? It may have been reduced, but my attack still did some damage."

In any case...

"With a lot of work, I can defeat it!" Inglis, focusing on a single point, let loose a flurry of thrusts—fast enough that others saw what appeared to be multiples of her hand and her blade.

Thud! Bam, bam bam, bam!

It sounded as if she were trying to chip through a boulder. The impact of her every sword strike echoed. The ice sword pierced a single point of the magicite beast's chest with unrivaled accuracy, and as everyone watched, they saw a deep wound open on the giant's chest.

"Wow! Not bad, Inglis!" Ripple cheered once more.

"You haven't even seen her at her full strength. But regardless, I can tell she's getting even better," Eris said.

"Haaah!" Inglis's last thrust, delivered with a large step, pierced through to the magicite beast's back. The strength ebbed from their gigantic body as they disintegrated in place with a roaring sound. In no time at all, the battle had been settled.

Rafinha gawked. "Chris... You just forced your way through with power and speed."

"Yeah, you ignored the basics of fighting magicite beasts. Avoiding its resistances really is the most elementary of tactics..." Leone said.

"I think being able to take on an enemy's strengths is important," Inglis refuted. "That way presents more of a challenge, you know?"

Inglis wanted to find a way to use any battle for her own growth. If possible, she wanted to win after letting a foe properly express its own strength. That was the best way to train.

"That's so like you, Chris... Well, personally I'd normally prefer to

use a different element.”

Leone nodded. “I agree with Rafinha.”

“But it’s good training!” Inglis insisted. The two of them didn’t understand at all.

“It seems that was the only one,” Eris said.

“Thanks, Inglis. You were super helpful,” Ripple said.

“No, it was a good workout. More importantly, Ripple, are you feeling better now?”

“Yeah. I feel a bit better! I’m fine, I’m fine.” Ripple still seemed to be a bit ill, but she waved off any such implication.

“I see. But where did that magicite beast come from?” Inglis stared overhead, but all she saw were blue skies. Nothing unusual at all.

“The beast came suddenly from above, didn’t it?” Rafinha asked, turning her gaze upward.

Leone looked up too. “Yes. What a shock.” Rafinha and Leone also looked up at the sky.

“Demihuman magicite beasts definitely aren’t something you see often. There aren’t even that many demihumans anymore—I wonder if it has something to do with me...?” Ripple wondered aloud.

“We don’t know anything for sure. We’ll need to check it out. Let’s wait for the arrival of the new ambassador from Highland,” Eris suggested.

“Yeah, you’re right.”

“By the way, Eris, Ripple, why are you here?” Rafinha asked. “We were waiting to meet with Rafael.” It was a natural thing to be curious about.

“Well, about that... Rafael had sudden orders and couldn’t come,” Eris said.

“So we came to let you know about that and pass along the money for your outfits. You’re attending the reception for the new ambassador, right? Here you go.” Ripple handed Rafinha a leather pouch containing gold coins.

“Wow! Thank you!” Rafinha exclaimed.

“Sorry to bother you,” Inglis said.

Leone wasn’t so sure. “Asking a hial menace to handle such a duty is—”

“It’s fine, it’s fine. We volunteered for it,” Ripple insisted. “But in exchange, will you let us go shopping with you?”

“What?! Hold on, Ripple, weren’t we supposed to head back when we finished?” Eris asked in surprise.

“It’ll be fun! Breathers are important! Very important! We’ve been stuck to the dead Prismers lately, our nerves all on end. Let’s just be girls for once. It’s fine to go have some fun with Inglis and the others,

yeah?"

"Aren't you sick? Don't play around. You need to rest."

"Laughter is the best medicine! If I have fun, I'll get better."

"That makes no sense." Eris sighed.

Inglis paused, watching the hial menaces, and said, "Somehow, Ripple reminds me of Rani. I always end up caught up in her whims, like Eris here."

"Oh *really*? I think I'm the one who always gets caught up in what *you* do, Chris," Rafinha shot back.

"The things Inglis does are so flashy..." Leone muttered.

"And I'm not battle-crazy like Inglis is," Eris said, disagreeing with the comparisons.

"Aha ha ha. Eris, I guess you aren't quite as much of a tomboy as Inglis is," Ripple said.

No one really agreed, but the two hial menaces ended up accompanying them on their shopping trip in the end.



Several days later, in the girls' dorms at the knights' academy...

Knock, knock. Knock, knock.

A knock arrived at Inglis and Rafinha's door. When they opened it to invite the person in, they saw Leone peeking in. She was already prepared, wearing an indigo dress. "Inglis, Rafinha! It's almost time, will you be much longer?"

"Shhh, quiet! You'll break my concentration!" Rafinha, a serious look on her face, was in the middle of something. Rafinha herself was ready in her yellow dress.

"Sorry, Leone. Rafinha is pretty focused, so she's intent to finish this. Anyway, that dress looks great on you. It's cute," Inglis said.

Leone chuckled. "Thanks. But I don't stand up to you at all."

Inglis had already finished putting on a vivid red dress. Now, Rafinha was styling Inglis's hair in an elegant updo as the finishing touch. One of Rafinha's oldest hobbies was to dress up Inglis in beautiful ways. It was a skill that came naturally to her now after having learned various things from the tailor she'd befriended in their hometown, Ymir.

"Really? But you're quite cute, Leone," Inglis repeated.

"If you insist! Thanks for the confidence booster."

"And—done! Chris, can you stand up and turn around for me?"

"Okay." As Inglis twirled, the hemline of her dress fluttered gently. The decorations in her hair gleamed.

"You're incredibly beautiful!" Leone said. "*Anyone* could fall for

you.”

“That’s why I can’t stop dressing her up. She’s the best possible material to work with,” Rafinha said.

“Hey, Rani, can I look in the mirror?”

“Sure. Go ahead.”

Inglis saw herself in the mirror placed on the wall by the room’s entrance. The dress she chose at the tailor in the capital was sewn from a high-quality fabric with an exceptional sheen, decorated in places with elaborate embroidery. When Inglis wore it, and had Rafinha do up her hair, her usually stunning beauty shone even brighter. The soft, pearly skin peeking out from beneath it surpassed all other treasures.

“Wow! It’s amazing! It looks incredible!” Wanting to see herself from different angles, Inglis tried various poses in front of the mirror. All of them could be summed up in a single word: *fabulous*. She’d grown into quite a beauty, if she did say so herself. She hummed to herself, obviously pleased.

“Yay! Chris is so cute when she’s excited about herself. I love her when she’s like this.”

Leone smiled. “Definitely. She’s so perfect she’s almost unapproachable.”



Grrrrumble!

Grrrrumble!

Inglis's and Rafinha's stomachs rumbled at the same time.

Leone paused at the synchronized sound. "You're both hungry, aren't you?"

"Yeah. We've spent all day looking forward to the party at the palace, so we haven't eaten." At Rafinha's suggestion, they'd fasted all day.

"Sheesh, you two! That's another reason you're unapproachable. People will think my stomach's rumbling too."

"It is rather rude, isn't it?" Inglis said hesitantly.

"Yes, very. Especially you, Inglis. People will be really surprised if someone as beautiful as you has a noisy stomach."

Inglis had a suggestion. "I guess we should get something to eat beforehand—"

"There's no time left for that, Chris. We can eat something when we get there. Now let's go! Delicious food is waiting for us!"

"You're right. Make hay while the sun shines."

"The principal is waiting for us too. Let's go," Leone said.

Inglis and the others left the dorm and entered the courtyard, where Principal Miriela was waiting. It seemed that she, too, would be attending today's party, and she would be escorting Inglis and the others there. The carriage she had arranged for was ready to depart.

"Wow! Those dresses look so cute on you all! You're gorgeous!" the principal cooed.

"Thank you!" the trio said together.

"Come on, now. Get in the carriage. We're off to the palace!"

When all four were aboard, the carriage set off.

Rafinha asked, "You aren't wearing a dress, Principal Miriela?"

Miriela was still wearing the robe of an academy instructor. "Well, yes. For this occasion, I'd like to properly negotiate as a principal."

"What kind of negotiations?" Leone crooked her neck.

"About whether they'll, perhaps, supply new equipment we haven't yet been sent down, of course. Today is a good opportunity to ask the new ambassador directly. Don't you want a flying battleship like that? You want one, don't you? Don't you?" Principal Miriela's eyes sparkled.

"That sounds great. I want their state-of-the-art anti-personnel weaponry. Can you ask them for that for me? I'd love to fight it," Inglis said.

"No, no, something dangerous like that is— And you only want to fight it and destroy it! Please don't destroy things we went through great troubles to be given."

Rejected—and so fast too.

“But, Principal, do you think they’d listen to such a request?”

Leone asked.

“Leone’s right. If it’s another Highlander like Muenthe...” Rafinha said.

“If I show off my, shall we say, charms...” Miriela suggested.

Rafinha and Leone whispered to each other, “That sounds extremely dangerous. No way.”

“Well, this time, we’ll be speaking with someone who will actually listen. Actually, I have contacts,” Miriela said.

“So, someone with experience as an inspector of the surface?”

“That too, but primarily the other way around. Someone who took care of me when I studied in Highland—but they’re a good person! Rare for a Highlander... It’s a shame I have to say that.”

“Huh, you can study in Highland?” Rafinha asked, curious.

“Well, it was a very special case. When Prince Wayne went to study in Highland, I went with him as a guard. I *do* have a special-class Rune, so I was wanted for my skills.”

“So you’re friends with Prince Wayne? Amazing!” Rafinha said, impressed.

“Ha ha ha. I wouldn’t go that far. More like, we grew up together.”

“Then, if someone close to not just you but Prince Wayne as well becomes the ambassador...”

“Yes. I’m going to lean as hard as I can on that connection to request all-new equipment!”

“The Steelbloods seem to have a flying battleship, so we may need one too,” Inglis advised.

“Yes. That’s an unfortunate situation, but on the other hand it’s also a sufficient reason to request new equipment. I don’t know who their black-masked leader is, but he sure can get his hands on that kind of thing.”

“Is he a collaborator with Highland?” Rafinha asked.

“Possibly, or he’s a Highlander himself,” Miriela said.

“That’s right. He could be,” Rafinha noted.

Leone said after a pause, “I think it’s also possible that the black-masked man is my brother, Leon. After all, he saved me...”

“All these possibilities... But that means we don’t know anything, right?”

“Yeah, Rani, there’s still so much we don’t know,” Inglis said. “But there’s one thing I’m sure of.”

“What?”

“He’s pretty strong. Next time we meet, I want to be sure to fight him. If I peel that mask off of him, maybe he’ll try to take me down to

keep me silent.”

“Ha ha... Peeling it off, not to find out who he really is or to know his true goals, but to make him angry enough that he attacks you? That’s just like you, Chris.”

“Well, he seems like he’s trying to avoid fighting me—even though I want to fight him.”

“Well, whatever your motivations, I think that if you discover the true identity of the leader of the Steelbloods and capture him, that’s exactly what our country is hoping for,” Miriela said. “So the next time you meet him, go for it. I give you my approval.”

“Thank you. And no matter what happens, you’ll take responsibility, correct?”

“Well, that’s a scary thing to hear... Just what in the world are you planning?”

As they chatted, the carriage carrying Inglis and the others approached the palace.

Chapter IX: Inglis, Age 15—The Hial Menace's Sickness (2)

When the carriage arrived at the venue, Inglis and the others were greeted by a nighttime palace decorated with lights in an array of colors. She wondered how the place was lit up like that. Along with the sounds of musicians, it gave the scene a certain fantastic *je ne sais quoi*.

"Wow, it's beautiful..." Leone smiled.

Rafinha's eyes were gleaming. "Amazing! The capital is so different. It's so elaborate. Isn't it, Chris?" she asked, excited.

"Yeah, it really is."

"And just imagine what that means about the food. It's *got* to be delicious."

"I can't wait to try it all."

"We've arrived. Let's head into the palace, everyone," Principal Miriela said, leading the group out of the carriage.

"All right! Let's go, Chris! I'm already so hungry, I can't wait!" Rafinha was the first out of the carriage and immediately broke into a run, unable to restrain her enthusiasm.

"Ah, Rani! If you run while you're dressed like that, you'll trip!" Inglis warned.

"Eek?!" Rafinha yelped. It wasn't only her dress getting in the way; she was also wearing high-heeled shoes, which she wasn't accustomed to walking in—much less running in. When she broke into her usual full-speed dash, she took a tumble in no time at all.

"Ugh, no sooner do I say it than— I can see your underwear. Hurry and cover yourself up." Inglis pulled the flipped-up hem of Rafinha's dress back to its proper spot and moved to help her up.

"Ha ha... Sorry about that. Thanks, Chris."

But there was someone else who had also rushed to her aid.

"Rani! Are you okay?!"

That other person was Rafael, who had been waiting for them to arrive. He helped Rafinha to her feet. "Up you go. You're not hurt, are you? You shouldn't worry Chris too much."

"Oww... Yes, brother," Rafinha replied.

Rafael turned to Inglis. "Chris, sorry for the trouble. Thanks for always taking care of Rani."

"No, it's mutual," Inglis said with a smile. Rafael looked almost

stunned, as if his thoughts were somewhere else. “What is it, Rafael?”

“Ah, sorry. I’ve just never seen you like this before, so I was taken aback. You really are beautiful.” He sounded awkward and stiff.

“Thank you. Rani put a lot of effort into making sure I looked nice.”

Inglis enjoyed the act of others dressing her up, and she just as much enjoyed the experience for herself. She didn’t particularly feel any need to be complimented on her appearance, but she didn’t object to it either.

“I sure did! She’s my best creation!” Rafinha exclaimed.

“Yeah, you really are good at this sort of thing.”

Rafinha seemed the happiest about Inglis’s transformation, and if Rafinha was happy, then Inglis was happy.

Rafael continued. “Uh... I notice you brought Rin along too.” Rafael had requested in advance that they bring the tiny magicite beast. Inglis wasn’t quite sure of the reason for that, but at the moment, Rin was peeking her face forth from her cleavage to see what was going on outside.

“Oooh, Rafael, you’re looking at Chris’s chest, aaaren’t you? If you weren’t, you wouldn’t have noticed Rin,” Rafinha teased.

Rafael stammered out an excuse. “S-Sorry! I just— I mean, I really was looking for Rin!”

A man looking at a woman in this way is understandable, Inglis thought. It’s instinctive.

Inglis knew as much from her experiences in her past life as a man. Though whether she enjoyed the male gaze placed on *her* was a separate matter. She appreciated the way the tips of his ears turned red from his guilty bashfulness, though. He may have spent several years as an adult in the capital by now, but the same young innocence from his boyhood was still intact. It warmed her heart.

“So, Rafael, is there something that concerns Rin?” she asked.

“Yes. Theodore—the new ambassador—hoped very much that she could attend,” he replied.

“The Highland ambassador...?” Inglis pondered.

“Whaaat?! Rin, are you gonna be okay if someone like that is paying attention to you?” Rafinha interjected in concern.

Rafael took on a reassuring tone. “I don’t think there’s anything to worry about there. I reported to Prince Wayne what you two said happened at Nova. However, he hid the information about Rin from Ambassador Muenthe, and then he revealed it to the new ambassador, Theodore. Meaning, he believes the new ambassador can be trusted.”

Grrrrumble!

Grrrrumble!

Inglis's and Rafinha's stomachs growled at the same time.

"Whoa?! What was that?" Rafael remarked in surprise.

"I'm starving. I haven't had anything to eat since morning," Inglis complained.

"Me too. There are so many delicious things to eat here, so we—"

"Well that's no good. The talk can wait, then. Let me show you to where the food is," Rafael said.

"Please!" Inglis's and Rafinha's eyes sparkled.

"Ha ha... Seems like you two have plenty of room in your stomachs." Rafael chuckled.

Leone spoke up. "I'd be grateful for that, Sir Rafael. It's embarrassing to be with them when their stomachs make such embarrassing noises."

Principal Miriela agreed. She and Leone both had worried expressions. "Truly. It would be best if we started off by getting something to eat."

"Then let's get going! This way!" Rafael called out.

Inglis and the others quickly followed Rafael into the palace. Even as they walked through quickly, all the attendee's eyes were glued to Inglis.

"Wow! Hey, did you see that? That girl's so beautiful!"

"Yeah, I've never seen anyone that cute—I guess she's an acquaintance of Rafael's?"

"She's like a doll, everything about her is perfect! Even a woman could fall for her—"

"The girls with her are cute too. Lady Miriela is accompanying them, so they must be cadets at the knights' academy."

Attendees whispered among themselves just in time for a sound to cut through the crowd.

Grrrrumble!

"Huh?! Wh-What was that?!"

"Someone's stomach?"

"It wasn't me. Was it one of those girls?"

Rafael swiftly smoothed over the crowd. "Ha ha ha... Sorry. I've been so busy I haven't had time to eat."

"Brother, you're so kind! I love you! ♪" Rafinha said.

"Thank you, Rafael," Inglis added.

"It's no problem. Anyway, the food is in this hall."

The room Rafael guided them to was packed with tables containing large plates and full of delicious smells. There were expensive-looking steaks piled high, colorful pasta dishes with

luxurious seafood, and chocolate cake for dessert, nearly piled in the shape of a tower.

There was plenty else, too, and all of it looked delicious. The empty-stomached Inglis and Rafinha couldn't resist. It was a mountain of wonderful treasure.

"All right! C'mon, Chris! Let's eat!" Rafinha cheered.

"Yeah! It looks delicious."

As Inglis and Rafinha eagerly approached the meat table...

Vwoom!

Inglis felt the air shaking as if it were distorted. Plus, she sensed the fluctuation of mana. A shadow passed over her.

Crassshhhhh!

The table, the plates, and the food went flying, destroyed by something huge landing from above.

"Wh—?! A magicite beast?! Here?!" Leone cried out.

The magicite beast was humanoid, with a beast's ears and tail, making them the demihuman type that Inglis and the others had recently encountered. The humanoid creature had leaped down from the high ceiling and, most unfortunately, had sprung out of the space directly above the table. People screamed in shock and horror at the intruder.

Rafinha's pained cry was for a different reason. "Ahhhhhhhhh! My meat!" The food she'd looked forward to sat in a heap on the floor, ruined. "Ugh... I didn't even get three seconds! Not even three seconds!"

"Nnh, Ranh, yuhnow suffu fhu ee oh va fluh. (No, Rani, you're not supposed to eat off the floor.)" Inglis said, giving her a warning with her own mouth full.

"Wait, Chris, what are you eating?!" Rafinha responded.

"Meef. Ayfooih meefuh ifew. (Meat. I caught it before it fell.)"

Mere seconds before the meat crashed to the floor, Inglis had pulled as much as she could from midair and crammed it into her mouth. She'd released the self-enhanced gravity she kept up as training and had even activated Aether Shell at full speed. When delicious food was on the line, one had to throw caution to the wind.

"Ahhh?! That's no fair, Chris!" Rafinha cried out in dismay as she looked at Inglis's stuffed cheeks.

"Ihfah. Eybson fuhui, foo. (It's fine. I have some for you too.)" Inglis brought a fork laden with meat to Rafinha's mouth.

"Vwewwa, Kwih! Ahmuyu umvuhfen! (Great job, Chris! I knew

you'd understand!)"

With a swallow, Inglis's own mouth became empty. She wanted to eat more, but Rafinha was like her doted-over granddaughter. And what grandparent wouldn't share food with their grandchild? "There are still safe tables! Let's protect our food!"

"Eah! (Yeah!)"

As typical of the very serious girl she was, Leone rebuked them. "Sheesh! Worry about the people caught up in this mess, not the food! We're supposed to become knights who protect this country's people!"

"Well, the results will be the same in the end," Inglis replied.

Something was looming nearby...

At that moment, the magicite beast closed in on Inglis.

"Inglis! Behind you!" Leone warned.

"Yeah," Inglis replied. She had, of course, sensed it. She didn't need to turn around to deal with it, but she did so anyway. She pointed an index finger in the direction of the magicite beast, the bluish white gleam of aether already beginning to gather at its pale tip.

Aether Pierce was a technique which shot a thin beam of aether from one's fingertip. And her aim was already on the magicite beast's forehead. It couldn't miss. "Aether Pi—" she began to say, but before Inglis could fire, someone got between her and the magicite beast.

"Chris! Get back!" It was Rafael, having covered no small distance in such a short time.

Inglis was surprised and honestly impressed by his swift footwork. "He's fast...!" Like a gust of wind or a bolt of lightning. So unexpectedly fast, she'd almost hit him with Aether Pierce. She'd pulled her finger back in the nick of time.

"There's no way I'll let you hurt Rani, Chris, or their friends!" Rafael yelled. The Artifact he carried was a longsword with a dragon motif, sheathed at his waist. When he drew it, a translucent blade was revealed, resembling a crimson jewel. It even appeared to glow. The sword was breathtaking. Even more spectacular were the swift slashes Rafael delivered with it.

The red gleam of the blade burst out in seemingly every direction simultaneously, and the massive body of the magicite beast went to pieces in an instant.

Inglis gasped. "Wow! Amazing..."

The weapon on its own may well have been impressive, but it was backed up by terrific power and speed. In pure skill, he surpassed even the former holy knight, Leon, who she'd fought. His prowess matched the hial menaces Eris and Sistia. Inglis could only find this

to be wonderful. He'd grown so much; the sparks of potential she'd sensed in young Rafael had been polished to a mirror sheen. Maybe it was his innate seriousness and responsibility. Maybe it was what Duke Bilford and Aunt Irina had taught him. Regardless, it all had led to the remarkable holy knight in front of her and his incredible skill with a sword.

The sight left her emotional. Inglis was trembling—with a warrior's excitement, of course. She would absolutely love to spar with him.

"That was amazing, Rafael! Chris is the only other one I haven't been able to follow the movement of!" Rafinha said.

"Rafael, I think the slash for your fifth blow and thrust for your seventeenth were especially impressive. Your movement was beautiful," Inglis complimented.

"You saw it all, Inglis?!" Rafael remarked in surprise.

"Yeah. Twenty-one strikes in all, right?"

Leone whispered to Rafinha, "That many?! Hey, Rafinha, how many did you see...?"

"Just the first two or three..." Rafinha whispered back.

"Same here. Glad it wasn't just me..."

"Ha ha ha... So you saw it all, Chris. Maybe you didn't need help. I reacted on reflex... Sorry," Rafael said.

"No, it's fine. I got to witness something nice. I'd like to spar with you later—at full power," Inglis said, hopeful of her chances.

Rafael looked conflicted. "Well, um—I don't want anyone to get hurt... I suppose a demonstration would be fine anytime."

How could she convince him to fight him for real? It was something she would have to contemplate.

"Rafael, leave the rest to them," Principal Miriela instructed. "Go to Prince Wayne and Ambassador Theodore. If anything were to happen to them, we wouldn't be able to recover from it."

Rafael had slaughtered the magicite beast that had fallen from above in front of them, but there were still several others in the hall and more could appear. Those needed to be dealt with but protecting the prince and the ambassador was the top priority. Principal Miriela was right; it would probably be more effective to split their forces.

"That makes sense. Rani, Chris, Leone, I'm leaving this to you! Handle the rest!"

"Yes, brother!"

"Understood."

"Leave it to us!"

Rafael spun on his heel and rushed from the hall. The magicite beasts closed in, surrounding Inglis and the others who remained.

"A rare chance to wear a gown, only to do the same things as

usual!" Rafinha grumbled as she leveled her Bow of Light Artifact.

"So true. It would've been so nice to enjoy ourselves for a day...!" Leone agreed.

Principal Miriela had produced their weapons seemingly from nowhere and handed them over. She must have used some kind of magic, or it could have been a power of her Artifact. Leone's dark greatsword had been shattered in the recent incident, so now she was wielding a different greatsword Artifact, a middle-class Artifact from the academy.

Inglis objected. "I'm having fun. I like fighting magicite beasts."

"Chris, you're an exception. You're like a wild animal in a dress!" Rafinha fired back.

Leone chuckled. "Ha ha ha. That isn't off the mark."

"Well, excuse me. I intend to fight completely prim and proper today," Inglis protested. After all, she didn't want to tear her new dress. She liked it, and she intended to wear it again.

"Prim and proper? How?" Rafinha asked.

"Like this."

Whoosh!

The pale blue light of Aether Pierce suddenly rushed from Inglis's fingertip. The beam's aim was true, and it pierced the brow of the magicite beast in front. The demihuman magicite beast crumbled to the floor, twitching. All that was left was to finish them off. It could be said that this type of magicite beast was comparatively strong, as a single blow did not kill it.

"See? This way I won't tear my dress or get it dirty," Inglis explained.

Whoosh! Whoosh! Whoosh! Whoosh!

A barrage of beams pierced the brows of one magicite beast after another. They fell like unresisting targets.

"See? Prim and proper."

"Well, I guess... But honestly, just taking them down like that is even scarier than usual," Rafinha said.

"Mm... It is kind of dull, I guess." This tactic made sense, but it still wasn't enjoyable. It was too one-sided. It was better to take an enemy at their strong points, overcome them, and win. In other words, taking on a magicite beast with your ineffective bare hands, or attacking it with an element it was strong against. In any fight, she wanted to, as much as possible, use it as an opportunity for personal growth.

Fights with magicite beasts, gorgeous dresses, and delicious food—everything Inglis Eucus liked was right here, but apparently mixing them wasn't a good idea. Oh well.

"But I have no choice if I don't want to tear my dress— Oh, Rani, Leone, can you finish off the downed ones?"

"Wait! There's some behind us too! Here they come!" Leone warned.

Not wanting to wait around and become targets, the magicite beasts rushed them en masse in an effort to stop Inglis, the source of the beams. Inglis found the tactic relatively wise, perhaps a remnant of being just as intelligent as humans. If they came all at once, she wouldn't be able to effectively speed up her shots to match them.

"Then how about this?" As Inglis continued firing Aether Pierces from her right hand, she extended her left hand backwards. "Mmm...!" Her left fingertip, too, shone with aether. She fired an Aether Pierce behind her, penetrating the magicite beast that was there.

"All right! I did it!" she cheered. Simultaneous fire in two directions—she hadn't been able to do that before. It was solid proof her daily training was paying off. She knew for certain she had become stronger. She allowed herself a moment of, more than anything, joy. "Look, Rani, look! I can shoot them from both hands at the same time now!"

Whoosh-whoosh-whoosh-whoosh-whoosh-whoosh!

As she wildly fired her attacks, Inglis's smile was as beautiful as a flower. She was having *lots and lots* of fun. Nothing was as fun as trying out new powers she'd grown to be able to use. In the end—not a single magicite beast could approach Inglis. All collapsed to the floor. "Phew... Fun fight, wasn't it?" The joy on her face was refreshing to see.



“Ha ha ha... As long as you’re having fun, Chris,” Rafinha said.

“I feel a little bit sorry for the magicite beasts. They didn’t get to do anything at all,” Leone said.

“Mm... I was so happy I got a bit carried away,” Inglis remarked.

“More than a bit, I’d say... Ah well, some of the food tables weren’t ruined!” Rafinha pointed out.

“Yeah. Shall we dine?” Inglis said.

“Of course! I can’t wait any longer!”

“C’mon, you two. We need to ensure every spot in the palace is all right. Some people might need help,” Leone interjected seriously.

Miriela, though, overruled her. “A little bit of a break is fine. After all, we need to finish off the magicite beasts that are still alive. I’ll handle that, so while I do, you can take care of your stomachs.”

“Great! ♪ Thanks, Principal Miriela!” Rafinha said, grateful.

“Thank you,” Inglis said.

With Principal Miriela’s approval, Inglis and Rafinha eagerly approached an untouched table. However, another magicite beast appeared there in a flash. As soon as they noticed the air around the ceiling twist, the beast was above the table.

Inglis noticed it first. “Look! There’s still—”

“Our food!” Rafinha cried.

Once again, the table would be destroyed, the food ruined. Inglis couldn’t let that happen! But if she rushed forward to smash the magicite beast away, her dress might tear. If she fired Aether Pierce, there was no way to stop the creature from falling on the table. And if she used her other technique, Aether Strike, she could well blow half the palace away. In that case, to convert aether to mana and create an appropriate imitation spell...

As Inglis thought it over, someone charged toward the magicite beast in midair. She looked to be in her late teens and beautiful, with shining blonde hair. It was the hial menace Eris.

“Haaah!” Eris rushed forward with tremendous speed, on a collision course with the magicite beast, while slashing with the right of her twin swords. It cleaved the magicite beast in half, and the force of the attack made them fall away from the table. As usual, Eris’s technique was fearsome. Just watching it made Inglis weak at the knees. She had an overwhelming desire to spar with her again.

But there was something else just as important. Thanks to Eris, the food on the table had been saved.

“Hooray! Thanks, Eris!” Rafinha said with glee.

“Thank you so much. You’re a lifesaver,” Inglis added.

They both bowed deeply to Eris.

Eris responded in confusion. “What’s the big deal? You could’ve

easily—”

Inglis tried to explain. “No, thanks to you the table wasn’t destroyed! You saved the food!”

“Wha...? Food?” Eris was still puzzled.

“Let’s eat!” Rafinha declared.

“Ah, no fair, Rani! Save some for me!” Inglis objected.

Eris, watching Inglis and Rafinha go for the food, sighed. “You two are always off in your own little world... Miriela, these are your students. Are you sure you’re okay with this?”

“Tee hee. Don’t you think girls with healthy appetites are so cute?” Principal Miriela smiled.

“Depending on time and circumstance, I suppose?”

“Well, you’re right, but they seem so incredibly hungry.”

Inglis confirmed that. “Vafflai! (That’s right!)”

“Vef! (Yep!)” Rafinha chimed in.

“I can’t understand what you’re saying! Ah well. Things are fine here now, so can you come with me after you’ve eaten a little? Something’s wrong with Ripple.” Eris had a calm but worried expression.

Something was wrong with Ripple? They couldn’t just relax and enjoy their food, hearing that. Inglis and Rafinha packed as much as they could into their mouths and left in a hurry with Eris and Leone. Following Eris, they all headed toward the audience chamber where Ripple was.

When they arrived, there were quite a few corpses of magicite beasts scattered about.

“Looks like this was their primary target,” Inglis said with a pause at the start.

Rafinha agreed. “Yeah, there’s a lot of them...”

“But they were stopped. The knights did their job,” Leone pointed out.

This was the royal palace, the center of the country. Naturally, the knights on guard duty were hand-picked. Because the assault was so sudden, many of the knights were injured, but they were still vigilant. Everyone had surrounded something at a distance, watching over the center carefully. Inside that circle was Rafael, Prince Wayne, and several Highlanders with stigmata. Rafael must have rushed to guard them.

As he noticed Eris, he called over. “Lady Eris! How goes the battle?”

“No problems, I believe. A large number appeared in the hall below, but these girls took almost all of them down,” Eris responded.

“I see. As expected from Rani and her friends.”

“How about here?”

“The same as before. She’s still in a stable condition.” Rafael’s gaze turned toward the center of the circle. There laid Ripple, unconscious. And not just sleeping, but covered in a dome of ominous dark light.

“Wh-What’s going on?!” Rafinha asked, panicking. The area around Ripple appeared as hazy as a mirage, and she realized from a quick glance that something serious had happened.

“Space is twisting around her? This obviously isn’t natural,” Inglis noted.

“Maybe that ominous light is calling the magicite beasts?” Leone speculated.

Eris nodded at Leone’s observation. “Yes. When she suddenly collapsed and was enveloped by that light, the distortion spread. That’s when many magicite beasts appeared. We’ve fought them off, but what is this...?”

When the magicite beast had appeared before, Ripple had seemed sick then as well. Maybe it was a sign. But why?

The knights began to talk among themselves. “For such a thing to happen... Did the hial menace summon the magicite beasts to attack us?”

“Maybe she defected to the Steelblood Front?!”

Given the example of Leon, it may have been unavoidable that the knights would have their suspicions. Eris suspected that was the source of their doubts, so she kept strong objections to herself. Inglis also felt she had to stay silent.

But someone had the courage to call out that line of thinking. This was, of course, none other than Rafinha.

“No! Ripple wouldn’t do that, and neither would Eris! During the incident in Ymir, Eris tried to stop Leon, and she saved us! And you all must know even better than us that she’s a good person! Eris and all the hial menaces have done so much to protect this country and its people! Believe in her friend!”

It was a forceful argument, though unconvincing given that Leon had also been a good person. The argument was childish, one could say—but that’s why it shined so brightly. Rafinha had a pure, honest innocence. Inglis couldn’t help but adore seeing it. How would Rafinha grow as a person in the future? Inglis wanted to stay by her side, protecting her, and find out.

A knight seemed unsure of how to respond. Faltering, he said, “I know that, of course. That much is true, but...”

Eris clapped a hand on Rafinha’s shoulder. “It is what it is. Don’t be angry with them. They have their own obligations. They always have to be on the watch for threats. It’s on us to show that we aren’t to be feared.” She spoke matter-of-factly.

“Er, yes...” Rafinha felt a bit dejected, as if she thought Eris was angry at her.

“But...I am grateful. Thank you,” Eris continued.

“Of course!”

Seeing them, Rafael whispered to Inglis. “Phew. Seeing Rani so insistent makes me nervous. Even if I tried to cover for her, it would be seen as favoritism, so I can’t really speak up...”

“She’s always like that. Anywhere, speaking to anyone—I think it’s a good thing,” Inglis replied.

“If you think so, that’s a relief.”

At that moment, a person advanced into the circle.

He was a young Highlander man with a stigmata on his brow. “I agree with the young lady. Hial menaces are guardians sent down from heaven—if one can’t believe in them, can’t join hands with them, it will be difficult to survive on the surface where the Prism Flow falls. They, too, once lived on the surface. To take on the duty of protecting this land, they sacrificed themselves to become hial menaces. I hope you can understand their origins.”

Was he the new ambassador who’d been mentioned? If he was, Inglis’s first impression of him was of an intelligent, gentle man, but also one with a firm will. She had to admit he was the complete opposite of his predecessor.

“Then, Eris was originally from the surface?” Inglis inquired. Ripple’s earlier remarks made it seem so.

“Sir Theodore, I’m not interested in old stories.” It seemed to be a point Eris didn’t want to touch on.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t intend to offend. Anyway, please believe them until the truth becomes clear. Their existence is proof of the bonds which exist between Highland and the surface. Of course, I shall cooperate in clarifying the situation. It shall be my first duty as ambassador.”

Prince Wayne kept a careful eye on the situation from within the circle. “Theodore, do you have any leads?”

“I can’t come to a conclusion lightly. But yes, perhaps. However, it may be the result of Highlander circumstances.” Theodore frowned.

“Circumstances on the Highlander side, you say?” Rafael’s expression sharpened slightly.

“Yes, Holy Knight Bilford. Just as many surface nations are not monolithic, Highland also has factions based on differences in ideology and beliefs. However, since we have a single government, this may be difficult to discern from without.”

“Meaning, the Altar faction seeks to interfere with your Throne faction?” Prince Wayne asked. Inglis inferred his familiarity with Highland politics was due to his time studying in Highland.

“Yes, Wayne. In my personal—no, perhaps not just personal—opinion, we of the Throne faction have begun to allow trade in not only Artifacts as is traditional but also Flygears and Flygear Ports. However, members of the Altar faction are strongly opposed to this. They fear it’ll lead to Highland eventually being stabbed in the back.”

In the recent incident, even Fars, who was Rambach and had become a Highlander, sought to assassinate Ambassador Muenthe. In light of that, Highland was in the midst of a policy dispute over what weapons and tools of war should be afforded to the surface. And since the stakes were high enough to include assassinations, the conflict had reached a boiling point—that much could be understood. Muenthe had not only been targeted for assassination by another Highlander, he had also fallen into the sights of the Steelblood Front of anti-Highland guerillas, and he was attacked by the kingdom’s own knights. It was quite a busy event. Even without Inglis there, his fate likely would have been the same.

“So you wish to make us pawns in your internal quarrel? We became hial menaces to protect the surface from magicite beasts, not for that!” Eris was indignant. After all, she was a hial menace herself, so she clearly had feelings on the subject.

“Indeed. However, hial menaces are guardians created by Highland—and if you do not align with those who granted those gifts, they likely have ways to destroy you from within. Lady Ripple was brought forth from their side, so I’m not sure of the details... But you, Lady Eris, are one of ours. That was how we kept a balance in this kingdom. But now, with the increasing bonds of our faction, that balance is collapsing,” Theodore explained.

“So, if circumstances were different, it could be me in that state rather than Ripple? In a way, I’d prefer that. It’s been quite some time since I became a hial menace, but I know so little about that. I can’t say I’m pleased about it.” Eris sighed deeply.

“But, Eris...” Rafinha called out to her.

“What?”

“I think it’s better that we have the Flygears and Flygear Ports. With them, we can move faster and go further to protect people attacked by magicite beasts.”

Many people around them nodded at those words, even if they didn’t speak up. Those present understood the importance of defending the country and its people from magicite beasts. Rafinha’s innocent opinion resonated with them. Even Rafael and Prince Wayne nodded.

“Rafinha’s right. Isn’t she, Inglis?” Leone whispered.

“Precisely. We get to be in more fights like this,” Inglis whispered back.

"I...don't think we're quite on the same page..."

"But the results are the same, so it's fine, right?"

"Ha ha ha. It's my fault for asking."

Meanwhile, Eris was silent.

"S-Sorry! I was rudely blabbing on!" Rafinha bowed her head.

Eris paused for a moment and then said, "No, it's fine. Perhaps your way of thinking about it is best."

"I shall try my hardest. I hope that Ripple can be as she was..." Theodore said. "So, please endure it a little longer."

"Yes. As you wish." Eris nodded in response.

"Thanks to you, we calmed Eris down." Theodore clapped a hand on Rafinha's shoulder and smiled. "A pure, straightforward opinion—you're as beautiful inside as out."

"No, I just... Aha ha ha, me, beautiful?" Rafinha responded shyly. Her cheeks blushed slightly. Inglis thought this was the first time she had seen her like this. At the same time, she felt an urgent sense of alarm. *This... This might be a vermin. The kind of vermin I have to eliminate.* Rafinha was too young for this sort of thing. Inglis wouldn't allow it.

"May I have your name?" Theodore asked.

Inglis quickly wedged herself between Rafinha and Ambassador Theodore. "Her name is Rafinha Bilford. She's the younger sister of Holy Knight Rafael, and I'm her squire, Inglis Eucus."

This was dangerous. Inglis needed to limit their time together as much as possible.



“H-Hey, Chris, what’s the big deal?! What’s with you all of a sudden?” Rafinha objected.

“It’s nothing. Don’t worry. I am your squire, after all.”

But Ambassador Theodore didn’t seem to pay any attention at all to Inglis’s ruffled attitude. “Bilford... I see, the holy knight’s younger sister! And Inglis, I’ve heard of you as well. You’re the ones who saved my sister’s life.”

“Sister?” Inglis asked in surprise.

“Yes. Cyrene is my younger sister.”

“Whaaat?!” Inglis and Rafinha both blurted out after involuntary gasps.

Chapter X: Inglis, Age 15—The Hieral Menace's Sickness (3)

"You're Cyrene's older brother...? Well, you do remind me of her. You're kind in the same way she is. Right, Chris?" asked Rafinha.

"I suppose..." Inglis could agree with that much.

She didn't mind Cyrene and Rafinha getting along very well, but Theodore—no matter how similar he was to his sister—and Rafinha being close was *unacceptable*. A "close" relationship could change into something even closer—and Rafinha had absolutely no need for a lover yet.

Inglis recognized it was her own selfishness making her dislike the idea, but she disliked it anyway.

Despite Inglis's internal feelings, Rafinha smiled at Theodore. She had let her guard down even further after learning he was Cyrene's brother. This was rapidly veering off course.

"I must deeply thank you both for saving my sister's life. I've heard she was transformed into a magicite beast, but where might she be?" Theodore asked.

"Here." Inglis pointed to her chest, where Rin's face was peeking out.

"Cyrene?! Ah, faint though it is, I still sense her mana... So this is what she's become..."

"I'm sorry. Keeping her like this was all we could do to save her —" Rafinha began.

"No, that's enough. Well done on your parts. As long as she lives, there's still hope. I vow to find a way to return her to her original state!"

"If there's anything we can do, please let us help!" Rafinha insisted.

"Absolutely. I'd appreciate it. Do you mind if I take care of her?"

"Not at all," Inglis said, scooping Rin from her cleavage. She couldn't refuse a request from Cyrene's own flesh and blood. Inglis began to hand her to Theodore.

Theodore brushed Rin with his hand. "Now, Cyrene. Don't worry, I'll figure something out, so—"

Chomp!

Rin bit down on Theodore's fingertip, and he yelped. "Ow! What's wrong, Cyrene?"

However, Rin, brusquely ignoring Theodore, burrowed back into Inglis's chest.

Rafinha didn't understand. "Rin? Your brother's here to see you!"

"What's wrong?" Inglis asked.

Rin, trembling, shook her head and hid herself completely inside Inglis's dress and squirmed around. "H-Hey, Rin! That tickles!"

Rafinha watched quietly and tilted her head. After a pause, she wondered aloud, "Maybe she doesn't want to go back?"

Theodore continued to call out to his sister for a time, and Inglis and Rafinha urged her on, but the situation remained unchanged.

"It seems she's acting a bit differently now... Perhaps I should leave her to you for a while." Ambassador Theodore clearly loved his sister. It wasn't a surprise that this turn of events was a disappointing one for him.

"That's quite all right. We don't mind," Inglis said.

"That aside, there's a mountain of things I must investigate. When the time comes, will you bring her to me?"

"Yes, certainly."

"Thank you. Then, as worried as I am about Cyrene, I'm concerned for Ripple as well. We need to find a way to deal with this phenomenon—Miriela, would you mind helping me with this?" Theodore's voice took a turn for the more casual as he spoke to the principal with what must have been the familiarity of an old friend. Miriela had mentioned that after all.

"Of course not!" Miriela said.

"Thank you. Thanks to your studies in Highland, your knowledge of our technology should be exactly what I'll need."

"Such high expectations! I'll do my best."

Prince Wayne cut in. "But what shall we do, Theodore? If magicite beasts continue to appear like this, you won't be able to calm down and research."

"I suppose. First, we must bring Ripple somewhere far away—we can't allow the palace to fall under attack repeatedly," the ambassador answered.

"I'll go with her," Eris offered. "If more magicite beasts appear, I can defeat them quickly. But...where should we go?"

No one seemed to have a ready answer.

"Ah, it's fine, I can go by myself," Ripple said, finally able to speak. Everyone turned to see her with her eyes open. The sphere of dark light covering her seemed to have vanished at the same time.

Eris rushed to her side as fast as she could and helped her up.

"Ripple! Ah, thank goodness—are you okay?"

There was nothing notably unusual about Ripple. It was as if nothing had been wrong at all.

"I felt some kinda wave, pulling at me—but I can somehow remember what happened. Sorry, everyone. I'm a hialal menace, supposed to be here to protect the surface, but instead I hurt you all..." Ripple sounded shocked like everyone else.

"That was out of your control. It's not your fault," Eris said.

"That's right! That didn't happen because you wanted it to!" Rafinha insisted.

Leone agreed as well. "Rafinha's correct. It couldn't have been your fault."

"Someone else *made* you do that," Inglis said.

Ripple listened to each of their kind words in turn. "Thanks, everyone—but I can't stand this. Why am I even a hialal menace, then? Wayne, tell me—where should I go? If there's nowhere right, it's fine if you destroy me or drop me off somewhere with nothing, totally alone."

"That's unthinkable! I could never treat a guardian of our country in such a manner. For now, let's be patient. Until then, you should rest somewhere under strict guard," Prince Wayne said.

In that case, the group needed to consider where to let Ripple rest and which guards to deploy.

Rafael was up to the task. "I'll immediately select the force to be allocated and the location."

Prince Wayne thanked him. "Yes, thank you, Rafael."

Now, in this situation—Inglis took a step forward. "Pardon me. I have a suggestion, if you don't mind."

"I have no objections. Speak," Prince Wayne replied, with a nod.

Rafael also nodded. "What is it, Chris?"

"Why not have Ripple stay at the knights' academy until a solution is found?" Inglis's eyes sparkled. With Ripple there, she could get some good combat experience from the magicite beasts that might appear without warning.

"At the knights' academy?" Prince Wayne thought Inglis's suggestion was a surprising one. He hadn't considered that idea.

"Yes. With Ripple incapacitated, that reduces the forces available to the knights. Moreover, if you assign trusted knights to guard her, that would be yet another drop in their strength. In a worst-case scenario, that could hinder our national defense. I know the frozen Prismer from Ahlemin was transferred close to the border with Venefic, which would imply that Venefic is seen as a palpable threat. Therefore, shouldn't we avoid thinning our guard? They could strike at our weakened defense. This situation may even be a trap with that goal in mind. I'm sure Venefic has its own Highlander ambassador—

and might that ambassador be of the Altar faction you mentioned before?”

Prince Wayne listened carefully, nodding. He turned to their own ambassador. “Theodore? What say you?”

“She’s correct. I cannot rule out a large-scale plot,” Theodore replied hesitantly.

“Well said, then,” the prince continued. “As expected, the Bilfords have a wise squire. Wouldn’t you agree, Rafael?”

“Yes. For as long as I can remember, Inglis has been smart and talented with the blade. She’s always supported Rafinha,” Rafael replied.

Prince Wayne turned to the squire in question. “It must be quite a relief to Rafinha to have you along.”

“I simply do what I can.” Inglis bowed. However, in truth, she hadn’t needed to think too hard about the knights’ plan. It was a simple deduction, really. They had just heard about Highland’s differing sects; if the ambassador to Venefic was from Theodore’s faction, something as hostile as an invasion would probably not come to pass. The surface was like a good feeding ground to the Highlanders. Acting in concert to disturb it is something the various groups wouldn’t do. She had ruled a country as its king in her previous life, so she could grasp that much.

And after coming to that conclusion, she had originally been ready to ignore her suspicions, because Inglis Eucus had no intent of being involved in national affairs or politics. Even if left alone, Prince Wayne or Rafael would likely understand the situation after a short while. Inglis had simply grasped it a step sooner—but that one step was vital.

“Then, shall Ripple stay at the knights’ academy?” she asked again.

Her explanation had, of course, been for the sake of making her request more likely to be accepted. Asking gently after having gained some favor would be more persuasive than insisting upon it from the start. Whether her deduction was correct made no difference in this case so long as they recognized the value in her opinions.

Prince Wayne paused, weighing his options, before he spoke again. “I can understand the logic of using forces other than our regulars, so as not to weaken our defenses, but—”

“Please! We may still be unpolished cadets, but our feelings are as strong as anyone’s!” Inglis continued. Feelings like—of course—the desire to use the magicite beasts summoned by Ripple as a source of training for personal growth. Not knowing when a fearsome magicite beast might strike would be the most effective practice. She’d have a sense of tension for once. She had no desire to devote herself to the

world and its people, but she didn't mind if others assumed she did. She wasn't lying—she was simply being vague.

Behind her, she could hear Leone and Rafinha whisper together.

“Hey, Rafinha. Inglis seems really serious today, doesn't she? I'm starting to feel a sense of awe.”

“I think you're mistaken about something again...”

“Huh?”

“This is Chris we're talking about! She just wants to fight the magicite beasts that pop up around Ripple!”

“Huhhh?!”

“I know how she acts normally, but she's sharp. She'll give you some kind of reason to talk you into something and— *Mmph!*”

“*Mmrrm!*”

Inglis grinned, having clamped a hand over each of their mouths. “Come on, you two, this is a serious discussion. No whispering to each other.” Thankfully, Prince Wayne didn't seem to have heard anything.

“Miriela, as the principal of the academy, what's your opinion on this?” the prince asked.

“Well... Inglis's opinion makes sense...but it would also expose many students to danger...” Principal Miriela was also avoiding a clear statement.

“It's not just that,” Rafael said. “The area around the academy is urbanized. If the magicite beasts overflow from there, the capital's citizens will be drawn in as well. I can't agree. We must use our regular forces.” He was clearly worried about putting Rafinha and Inglis in danger.

Ambassador Theodore had his own thoughts on the matter. “However, to understand what's happening to Lady Ripple from a technical standpoint, we are in need of a significant amount of equipment. Miriela, you must have a lab at the academy. A few tweaks and it should be fine—whereas elsewhere, preparations may be a great deal of trouble.”

“Would it be possible to bring Ripple to Highland for an examination?” Eris interjected.

The ambassador shifted uncomfortably. “Lady Eris, I'm sorry, but I believe it'd be better to refrain. To put it bluntly, members of the Throne faction would likely...dispose of her...if she were of use to an Altar plot. They may be in the same political camp as I am, but that doesn't mean they're people like me. If anything, people tend to act more like my predecessor, Muenthe.”

“I see...” Eris cast her gaze at the floor as Prince Wayne took over.

“Meaning, entrusting her to the knights' academy is the swiftest way to settle the situation?”

“But possibly the one most likely to worsen it. Which answer is

correct, we can't know in advance. This isn't an academic matter," Miriela replied.

"Hmm... Our school days together up in Highland were easier than this." Prince Wayne smiled. Theodore responded with his own grin.

"I suppose they were, but I believe this pressure is also proof we're approaching our ideals."

"I have to agree."

Prince Wayne and Ambassador Theodore appeared to have something hidden within them. Inglis supposed she had felt something similar when young in her previous life. At a young age, King Inglis had taken on the fate of the country and its people and become completely absorbed in them. However, the era that Inglis had passionately served had passed. So even though she had no words beyond "This must be tough," she wanted them to try their best. This new era should be defined by its own people. Her own goals were to watch over Rafinha and to do what she wanted.

"I've heard these girls not only saved Cyrene's life, but also protected the former Chancellor Arcia during the recent incident. They also prevented the ship from crashing into the palace. That may not be a bad bet to take," Theodore advised.

Inglis latched onto a particular remark from Ambassador Theodore. "The former chancellor? What happened to Chancellor Arcia?"

Prince Wayne explained, "He resigned. As you know, the recent events were not recorded. Thus, there should have been no need to hold Lord Arcia accountable—but he was insistent that he had set a poor example. I suppose the public explanation will cite health worries, but... He's just and upright, swayed by no one. A true fit for the post of chancellor. It is a shame. I'll be taking over his duties on a temporary basis."

"And then, some of the work Wayne was in charge of will be reassigned to Holy Knight Bilford and Lady Eris. So everyone will be rather busy," Theodore noted.

"Then leave some of it to us! I want to do something to help Ripple!" Rafinha insisted.

Inglis had expected Rafinha to say something like that. Even though their reasons were different, she'd known Rafinha would agree. Rafinha's sense of justice wouldn't allow her to remain silent in the face of Ripple's situation.

"Rani, you still have a lot to learn," Rafael warned. "You're still gaining strength. That's how you'll become a true knight—that's why you've been entrusted to Miriela and the others. Now isn't the time to overdo—"

“That’s not it, brother. I’m grateful to Ripple, so I want to repay her! After all, she’s always been protecting this country, protecting us. It shouldn’t matter if I’m a regular knight or not, should it? I want to do what I can now!”

Inglis found herself chuckling as she watched them interact. She remembered when Rafael and Aunt Irina had gone back and forth like this. Irina’s position then was Rafael’s now, and Rafael’s position then was Rafinha’s now. Perhaps that was the result of growing up.

“Ha ha ha...”

“Chris?” Rafinha looked on, confused.

“What is it?” Rafael asked.

“Oh, it’s nothing. I was remembering when Rafael heard something similar from the duke and my aunt—it really takes me back,” Inglis explained.

“Huh...? I...I think I remember that happening now that you mention it—but you remember it well for being so young then, Chris...” Rafael said.

“I am proud of my memory,” Inglis replied.

“Anyway, brother, I guess that means you’ve turned into just as much of a stick in the mud as dad. Keep it up, and Chris won’t like you anymore!”

“Whaaat?!” Rafael yelled.

“That isn’t true. I like the duke.”

“Now isn’t that a relief, brother?”

“C’mon, c’mon, this is no time to talk about...” Rafael trailed off, uncomfortable.

Prince Wayne watched them bemusedly. “Ha ha ha. Even the ‘perfect holy knight’ Rafael is nothing before his family.”

“Ahh... I apologize for the awkwardness,” Rafael said.

“No, I don’t mind. It made me smile. Then, Leone. What do you think? I’d like to hear your opinion on this,” Prince Wayne said.

“Er... Me?”

“Yes. I want to hear what everyone has to think.”

After a pause, she answered. “I agree with Inglis and Rafinha. I’d like to repay my debts to the hial menaces—and, more importantly, I’d like to have achievements of my own as fast as possible, and this seems like a chance to do just that.”

“That makes sense—if you want to clear your family’s name, I suppose it’s natural that you’d think of it that way.”

Leone’s family, the Olfas, had once been the pride of Ahlemin because of her brother, a holy knight by the name of Leon. But when he cast aside that role and joined the Steelblood Front, that perception had been flipped upside down. Now their whole family was eyed with suspicion as traitors. Leone had said she’d decided to become a knight

in order to change that with her own achievements, and she was trying hard, even as her relationships at the knights' academy suffered.

As far as Inglis could see, Leone was second only to her in drive among her fellow cadets. When Inglis did her own extracurricular practice, Leone often offered to join in. So her saying that she wanted her own achievements as fast as possible was quite expected.

"Since what happened was not officially addressed, your own exploits couldn't be revealed either. This must bother you greatly. I'm quite sorry," Prince Wayne said.

"Ah, no—in any case, I don't think that would be enough to change everyone's minds, and Inglis did most of— *Mmph!*"

Before she could finish, Inglis pressed a finger to Leone's lips to interrupt her. She didn't have to tell the whole story honestly. Leone was more than welcome to take the credit.

Leone needed it, and Inglis did not. Inglis needed not the notoriety from battle, but battle itself. If she could be proud of the results her own training delivered her therein, that was enough.

Inglis whispered, "Why not just say we all did it together? I don't want to stand out. And you *need* to stand out, right?" All of the official fame and credit could be given to Leone, who was bravely moving forward and doing her best.

"Ah, pardon?" Prince Wayne asked.

"Er, it's that..." Leone stammered. "I'd like to have an opportunity to prove my merit again. I'll give eliminating the magicite beasts all I have."

Inglis agreed. "I, too, would like a further opportunity. I *will* protect Ripple."

"Well, it's not really me you'd be protecting, ya know? It's everyone else who'll be in danger because I'm there." Ripple's phrasing was still a little bit playful, but her tone had none of its usual cheerfulness.

"I imagine you must feel guilty about that, Ripple. If we defeat the summoned magicite beasts without letting anyone, including the citizens, be hurt, there should be no worries. And I want to protect you," Inglis said.

"Inglis..." Ripple started to tear up.

"So you're even thinking of that..." Eris was impressed.

Inglis answered them both with a smile. She had no objection to helping Ripple when she was in distress, either. If anything, it wasn't enough thanks for the good, tense training it would provide.

Clap!

A hand suddenly clapped Inglis's shoulder from behind.

"You're completely right, Chris! I can't help but be moved, even though I know what you're thinking! That's right! We will protect Ripple!" Rafinha's eyes gleamed, and her breathing had quickened. Inglis's wording had struck a chord in her.

"Ha ha ha... Thanks, Rani."

"I understand how you feel. Then, in consideration of your spirit, I will entrust Ripple to the knights' academy. Theodore, aid them. I will explain to the king—to my father." Prince Wayne delivered his decision in a dignified manner.

"Understood!" Inglis, Rafinha, and Leone answered as one. It was exactly as they'd hoped. And an exciting new course was about to be added to their training at the academy.



"Things turned out like this, but I'm still not sure if it's okay..." Ripple dipped her face halfway below the surface of the bath and began to blow bubbles.

"It'll be fine. I'm ready at all times. Even now, if need be. You're welcome to try," Inglis replied, soaking next to her.

They were in the baths of the girls' dorms at the knights' academy. After the prince had come to his decision, their first stop after returning from the palace was here, to relax.

"Well, I can't control it... So can you stop looking at me with those greedy eyes?"

"C'mon, Chris. Ripple's having a hard time. Don't tease her," Rafinha scolded mildly.

"That's not what I meant. We can think of this as good training, so there's no need for her to worry," Inglis said.

"I think that's just you, Chris. Don't include us in that," Leone said, nodding in agreement with Rafinha.

Principal Miriela, who had been the one to suggest they immediately head to the baths, took Inglis's side. "Well, depending on how you look at it, Inglis might be right. It's sure to be valuable battle experience."

"But... I don't want anyone to get hurt because of me... That's not the kind of thing a hialar menace does..."

"It's fine. If that phenomenon occurs again, I'll immediately create a barrier and wall it off from the surroundings." Miriela shook her Artifact staff back and forth to emphasize her point. She'd brought it with her—even to the bath.

Now that the principal was present, Inglis had to contend with the sexiness of a full-grown woman. She wasn't quite sure where to look.

Miriela continued. "Then, after I keep our surroundings safe, my

talented students Inglis and the others can wipe out the magicite beasts. That should prevent anyone from getting hurt.”

“Okay... But what about when you aren’t there, Miriela? You can’t stick with us all the time, right?” Ripple asked.

“Theodore is preparing us Artifacts with the same effect. By the way, I also requested a new Artifact for Leone!”

“Wow, thank you!” Leone replied.

“It’s a rare opportunity, so I have to get everything I can. Hee hee hee.”

Principal Miriela was pretty shrewd. It was definitely a good idea to have several barrier Artifacts.

Miriela continued. “We can prepare multiple groups to take turns watching over their surroundings. It’ll just be a little wait. And since you’re already waiting, why not treat this like a little vacation?”

“W-We can’t just blow it off like that...” Ripple said.

“It’s fine, we’ll try our hardest! We know that you’ll be sad if anything happens to us!” Rafinha said, sending a splash around her as she forcefully sprung to her feet. There was nothing wrong with her enthusiasm, but she was completely naked. It was embarrassing to look at her.

“But also,” Rafinha added, “this is a rare chance to enjoy ourselves. And we want to be closer friends with you...”

“Rafinha...” Ripple trailed off.

“So... Please cheer up a little?”

“Mm... You’re right. If I’m all mopey, it’ll get everyone down. Thanks, Rafinha. Hope you don’t mind me imposing?” Ripple smiled for the first time in a while.

“Of course!” Rafinha cheered.

Some people might have found Rafinha lively, fearless, honest, and cheerful personality grating, but Ripple and Eris accepted her, which Inglis appreciated. It was pleasant to see how much they cared for her and could protect her.

“But seriously, Rani, cover up. That’s immodest.”

“It’s fine! We don’t have anything to hide from each other! Chris, show off what you’ve got too!”

“Aaagh! S-Stop it, Rani! That’s absurd!”

“It’s fine, it’s fine! You too, Leone!”

“I-I’m good. You two go ahead!”

“Nope! No one can escape!”

“Eeek!” Leone yelped. She switched into her scolding mode. “Ugh, Rafinha! If you do things like that, Ambassador Theodore will be disappointed in you! And after he just praised you, sheesh...”

“Huh...? Really?”

“Yes, he’ll think you’re not modest enough.”

“Weeell, I guess I’ll stop, then...”

Inglis shouted in haste, “No! Here, Rani, you can look as much as you want and touch as much as you want! Don’t concern yourself with him!”

Ripple smiled as she watched the trio. “Must be nice to be young and cute. They look like they’re having fun.”

“They certainly do. Watching them lifts my spirits as well,” Principal Miriela replied.

“Aha ha ha. Feeling that way must mean you’re getting older, Miriela.”

“Ugh...! I know I’ve got a lot to worry about, but I’m still young at heart!”

“Oh? But on the outside, you’re all grown-up and beautiful. Hial menaces don’t change at all, so I’m a little jealous watching all of you mature...”

“As I said earlier, please leave matters to us. Take a break. There are many excellent students at the knights’ academy who are just as skilled as this trio is. That’s a rarity in recent years!”

“Wonderful,” Inglis suddenly interjected. “Who and where are these students? In one of the senior classes? Any plans for joint practices?”

“Whoa! Inglis, you’re always so attentive to this sort of talk,” the principal replied.

“Indeed. To become stronger, I need to fight stronger foes.”

“N-Not allowed, young lady! Not with the situation how it is. Mock battles between students are forbidden. We can’t have you getting hurt.”

“What?! That’s—”

“C’mon, Chris, it’s fine. Magicite beasts will pop up. You can fight them,” Rafinha said.

“But Rani, the more fights the better! I’ll definitely grow more that way—life is too short to waste any time.”

“It’s silly to act like you might die tomorrow. You don’t need to get worked up. The seniors aren’t going anywhere soon. Just relax.”

“Mmm...” Inglis didn’t quite agree, having already experienced the rush of regrets—if one had done more of this, more of that—that comes at the end of a lifetime. That’s why she fiercely believed it was better to seize every opportunity.

Principal Miriela laughed. “Ha ha ha... You really do have an amazing personality, Inglis. When you’re not talking, you seem like this gentle, pretty little thing who wouldn’t hurt a fly, yet—”

“Why, thank you. That’s very kind.”

“That...wasn’t a compliment, Chris,” Rafinha pointed out.

“But she said I’m cute.”

"That's the part you focus on?"

"Well, my personality isn't going to change. Better to accentuate the positives."

"Sometimes I wish it would a little bit..."

The two of them paused and then said together, "Hmm... That's probably impossible."

Rafinha sighed. "I guess so. After all, you're you."

"That I am."

Ripple grinned. "You two get along so well. Anyway, if mock battles between students are no good, I'm fine with taking you on."

"Thank you so much! Is now all right?! Where shall we fight?! How about right here?!" Inglis, anticipation clear as day on her face, jumped out of the bath.

"Uh, well, not at this second. After Miriela and the others can check me out and make sure it's okay for me to move around like that."

"C'mon, Chris, cover yourself up. That's embarrassing!" Rafinha scolded.

"Phew, never a dull moment with them..." Leone muttered to herself with a sigh.

Extra: Leone's Move

One day had passed after the group had stopped the flying ship from crashing into the palace.

Leone was moving rooms in the dorms, back to sharing a room with Liselotte, as originally planned.

"All right, that's everything." Leone let out a sigh of relief as she finished moving her luggage.

"Well, once again I'm looking forward to our time together. Though... It seems you don't have much with you?" Liselotte crooked her neck.

"I didn't bring much to begin with." Leone's belongings were enough to fit in one large traveling pack, which contained mostly clothes and books. She hadn't brought much from home. As seemed to be the case with major noble families, the more sentimental or important an item was, the more likely it was to be engraved with the family emblem. And currently, the Olfa family was scorned behind her back as traitors. Therefore, bringing such things would have caused problems. She'd disposed of most of them before departing for the academy. "Yet you have so much, Liselotte... Ha ha ha."

All of the furniture in the room had been replaced with furniture bearing the Arcia's emblem. Leone wondered where the previous furniture had gone.

"The room as it was originally was too plain—it was lacking that touch of glamour—so I got the principal's permission to redecorate."

That much was true; there wasn't a hint left of the original, simple décor. Only gleaming, luxurious ornamentation was on display. This dorm room didn't seem like much of a dorm room.

"Leone, please use that wardrobe and desk. I apologize that they are marked with my family's emblem."

"O-Okay. Thanks for letting me use them."

Each was painted a bright white with gold decorations and proudly bore the Arcia emblem. Leone was a bit jealous that someone could be so proud of their family. With that on her mind, she began filling the wardrobe with her clothes.

"Let me help! We can get it done quickly and have tea afterward," Liselotte offered. Even though it was a dorm room, it was equipped with an expensive-looking white porcelain tea set.

"Huh? You don't need to help."

“Don’t be silly. Besides, I’m curious what clothes you brought with you.”

“I don’t think there’s anything interesting about them.”

“No, there is—all your clothes are so open at the chest. They must be embarrassing to wear. They’re surprisingly bold... Especially with how serious your personality seems to be.”

“I-It’s not like that. If my clothes aren’t like that, they end up too tight...” The average piece of clothing wasn’t cut for Leone’s figure. Most were too tight in the chest. With a lack of other options, she tended to choose those with more open chests. She was sure Inglis would understand that frustration.

“I see. Yes, that makes sense. It isn’t just shamelessne—”

“It isn’t *at all*! It’s something different!”

Thus, their conversation went until the clothes and books were put away.

“Yeah, that’s it. Thanks for the help.” Leone took in a breath and sat down in a chair at her desk.

“Aren’t you forgetting this?”

Liselotte set a small picture frame down on Leone’s desk with a light *thump*. It was a tabletop portrait of the Olfas. In it were her parents, Leon, and Leone herself. Her family—back when they were still happy. Leone had been carrying it in her bag but hadn’t been able to bring herself to take it out.

“Ah... B-But—”

“I don’t mind. And no one else will see it.”

“Thanks...”

Liselotte’s thoughtfulness soothed Leone. She’d been worried about how this would go, but now she was sure she’d be fine.

“I’ll start the tea, then,” Liselotte said.

“Let me help.”

Liselotte, who seemed to be fairly sheltered, wasn’t familiar with making tea. It was just as well that Leone helped. “You seem to be used to this.”

“Yes. I have a lot of experience doing housework.”

After Leon had deserted to the Steelblood Front and people had begun to drift away, Leone had been forced to live alone. Inevitably, she had learned a lot on her own.

Once they finished preparing the tea, they sat back and sipped from their cups.

“This is delicious. It’s good tea,” Liselotte said in praise.

“Yes. I’m glad it pleases you.” Leone’s lively times with Inglis and Rafinha were enjoyable, but so were more elegant moments like this.

“I’m sorry if it’s rude to ask...but what would make a holy knight of rank and fame betray his country and join the Steelblood Front? I

simply don't understand." Liselotte stared at the Olfa family portrait.

Leone chewed over her response. "I don't understand either. According to Inglis, he couldn't tolerate the Highlanders' outrageous behavior any longer..."

"Well, I have heard that many Highlanders are quite high-handed..."

"Yes. I think he saw it so often that he couldn't hold his frustration back."

"So he's kind?"

"Or maybe weak. After all, Rafael is kind. He must have seen the same things as Leon, yet he has not forsaken his duty as a holy knight."

Liselotte remained silent, listening intently.

"There's something Inglis said before: The holy knights and hialal menaces, who protect this country and its people, are our last hope... Having to turn a blind eye to the acts of the Highlanders is paradoxical with that duty. Being unwilling to ignore them could be called weakness, or it could be understood as strength."

Depending on one's viewpoint, being unable to stand a paradoxical duty could be called weakness, or pointing out that evil and resisting it could be strength.

"I see... That makes sense..." Liselotte said.

Leone continued. "But I think it's weakness. That's why I'm going to become a knight and stop my brother. If I don't do it with my own hands, the stain on the Olfa's honor will never fade. That's why I'm here."

"I agree. Duty is duty. It must be followed. I'll do my best to help you."

"I really appreciate that."

"By the way, speaking of that—did Inglis consider that strength or weakness?"

"She said she wasn't interested and didn't really care."

According to Inglis, ideology had nothing to do with combat prowess. When Leone had persisted in asking her which it was, she had answered, "I defer to Rani."

"Oh? She's a strange one, isn't she?"

"Well, she's a good person, but..."

"Yes, I suppose—and strikingly beautiful."

"Absolutely. Yet even though she's so cute, she has no interest in anything but fighting." Leone thought Inglis understood other things and chose to ignore them. In a way, it was refreshing and hard to object to. "Um... By the way, Liselotte, can I ask one thing of you?"

"Mm? Yes, what is it?"

"I may be a little loud at night... Please act like you don't notice,"

Leone requested.



Under a starry sky, the streets of the capital slept quietly. Leone stood on the roof of the tallest shop and looked around.

"This must be why you asked me that before. It's against school rules to leave campus without permission, you know," Liselotte reminded Leone even as her own presence made her complicit.

"Liselotte, you didn't have to come."

"But didn't my assistance make it easier for you to reach the capital?" Liselotte's Gift for her Artifact let her grow bright white wings and fly with them. Thanks to her carrying Leone out of the academy through the sky, it had been easy to get outside.

"Well, yeah, that was helpful, but—"

"What are your plans now that you're here?"

"Inglis and Rafinha suspected they saw my brother in the city earlier... He might still be infiltrating. Even if I don't find him, I may find other Steelbloods up to something... That's why I'm investigating."

Recently, the Steelbloods had not only administered Prism Powder to Ambassador Muenthe, but they'd also launched a full-scale assault. Somebody had to have been involved, and they had to be lurking in the city somewhere. If that person wasn't Leon, then maybe she could find a lead on him.

"In this vast city? Isn't that like trying to find a needle in a haystack?"

"It's fine. I want to do what I can now, and besides—running along the rooftops is good training."

"You want to train more at *this* hour? You do so much all day..."

"That's something I've learned from Inglis. If she has any downtime, she spends it on training. If I want to stop my brother Leon, a holy knight, I need to become much, much stronger. So it's two birds with one stone—let's go!" Leone nimbly leaped to another rooftop.

"Well, since I'm already here, I'll join in!" Liselotte followed Leone, not with her Gift but with her own legs.

Thus, their nights of training in the city began. Liselotte didn't come along every time, but she did frequently.

And then, one day...

"I think something might happen tonight..." That evening after training, Leone looked out the window with a serious expression. She could hear the rain fall. And the rainclouds floating in the sky shone

faintly. The Prism Flow was falling.

“Are you actually going out, Leone? Even though the Prism Flow doesn’t affect humans, isn’t it best to stay inside?”

“I won’t be able to say that when I’m a knight. The times when the Prism Flow falls are the most dangerous, so knights need to be out there protecting other people.”

Liselotte paused. “That’s true. So it’ll be a good rehearsal?”

“Yes. Let’s go!”

As the Prism Flow fell, the two used Liselotte’s Gift to fly into the city. This gave them the widest possible view. Many knights had already deployed around the city, on alert. If a magicite beast appeared, they’d be ready to respond quickly.

“With this many knights, the Steelbloods might just decide to stay hidden...” Leone noted.

“What shall we do? Return?” Liselotte asked.

“No—over there! Magicite beasts have appeared, but no one’s headed there yet!” A number of dog magicite beasts had appeared, apparently strays transformed into monsters on the outskirts of the capital decorated with many shabby houses—the slums. It was possibly the hardest place for the knights to reach.

“Let’s go, then!” Leone said.

“Yes!” Liselotte flew at full speed, and in moments they had arrived above the magicite beasts.

“I’m landing!” Leone let go of Liselotte’s hand and jumped down. She readied her greatsword in the air, taking a downward thrusting stance. The dark greatsword upper-class Artifact Leone had originally used had been broken recently, so she was currently using a middle-class Artifact borrowed from Principal Miriela. Rather than being dark, the blade was a faint light blue. This Artifact wasn’t as powerful, but if she could use the momentum of her fall...!

But before Leone’s blade could pierce the magicite beast, its huge body twisted, contorted, as if being crushed.

Blammmmm!

Alongside a thundering noise, the magicite beast was blown away by an incredible force. Leone’s sword lost its mark, instead plunging toward a figure who had suddenly leaped into its place. Even in the dark of night this person was beautiful, with long hair that seemed to shine like the moon...

“Inglis?! L-Look out!”

Thwack!

Inglis clapped her hands around the blade of Leone's sword as it thrust from above, stopping it. "Ah, Leone. What a coincidence." Inglis grinned as if nothing had happened.

"I-Inglis... That was crazy..." Leone said, amazed. Inglis had easily stopped Leone's thrust, even with her full weight and the momentum of her fall behind it. Leone felt frustrated—but she also saw such strength as a good example to strive for.

"Really?"

"It really was. So, did you come to fight the magicite beasts?"

"Yeah. It's a valuable chance for a real fight. When the Prism Flow falls, I can't just sit back and watch." Inglis's eyes shone happily.

"Chris! C'mon, don't just go ahead alone like that!" a voice called out.

"Ah, Rani. Over here," Inglis said.

"Well, this has certainly gotten quite lively! But there's still plenty more magicite beasts!" announced Liselotte.

"Inglis, Rafinha, Liselotte! Let's all join up!" Leone shouted. As she called out to them, Leone realized how much more reassuring being together was than when she had fought alone in Ahlemin. She had three friends here who understood her.

"Yeah."

"Okay!"

"Understood!"

Hearing the three responses, Leone leveled her blade at the nearest magicite beast. "I'll take this one first!" Advancing on the doglike creature with all her might, she thrust upward into its throat from below.

Zsssh!

The blade of Leone's greatsword thrust into and then through the magicite beast's neck. "I'm not done yet!" She swung the blade to the side with all her strength, completely severing its head.

"Good job, Leone," Inglis said.

"Even if you're using a middle-class Artifact, it's all in how you use it!" Rafinha added, cheerful.

"Excellent swordplay!" Liselotte called out to her as they spread out.

Leone thought again, *I'm glad I enrolled in the knights' academy. I can become stronger if I'm alongside these girls. Strong enough to stop Leon—someday!*

Thanks to the exploits of Leone and the others that night, the Prism Flow's wreckage was kept to a minimum. However, they

couldn't escape the principal's watchful eye. For breaking school rules, they all found themselves with a scolding.

Afterword

First, thank you very much for picking up this book! So, that's the second volume of *Reborn to Master the Blade: From Hero-King to Extraordinary Squire* ♀. What did you think of it? I hope you enjoyed it.

The manga version by Moto Kuromura has also started. Have you seen it? If you haven't seen it yet, check it out! It's great, and I really recommend it. In fact, my first impression of Chapter 1 was "Hey, wait, the manga's more interesting..." Later, when I'd read a few more chapters, my impression was still "Hey, wait, the manga's more interesting..."

It's impressive how easy the action is to understand when drawn. Plus, the characters are cute.

I settled on a cute girl for a main character because I thought a character who thinks like she does, has a personality like she does, and acts like she does absolutely has to be cute. At first, I didn't really have a clear picture of the visuals, but that also turned out to be very good for a manga adaptation. I believe the manga started almost at the same time as the novels because of a consideration for how well it could serve as an adaptation. When I start a new series in the future, I'd like to try working backwards from what would be adaptable to manga. I feel like that way, it would probably have a longer lifespan.

I digress, but anyway, I'm going to work hard to make the novels just as good as the manga. I'm hoping the two can influence each other in a positive way, and the synergy will bring me to a personal series length record! My current longest is six volumes, so I want to try for at least seven! I'll be doing my best!

Finally, I'd like to thank my editor N, the illustrator Nagu, and everyone else involved for their hard work and dedication.

Goodbye for now!

Shortly after Inglis is admitted to the knights' academy, she enjoys her first time piloting a Flygear.

“Even faster than I thought! Aha ha ha! ♪ This feels so good!”

“Wow! This is pretty fast!”

“Ahhh! I-Isn't this a bit too fast?! It's pretty scary...”

2

Author:
Hayaken
Illustrator:
Nagu

Reborn to Master the Blade:
From **Hero-King** to Extraordinary Squire ♀

Lahti

A boy in the squire program like Inglis. His skill with a Pfygear surpasses Inglis's own.

Liselotte

The daughter of a duke, who serves as the country's chancellor. She is training to be a knight and takes a stern attitude toward Leone for being Leon's sister.

Pullum

A girl in the knight program who gets along with Lahti. She has a sharp gaze for girls who get too close to him.

Leone

The younger sister of the traitorous holy knight, Leon. She is training to be a knight. She's good friends with Inglis and Rafinha, so she often works with them.

Rafinha

(Ram)

Inglis's childhood friend and Duke Biltford's daughter. She possesses a Ramie and is training to be a knight.

As Inglis enjoys life at school and her self-training, she befriends her unique classmates.

Inglis

(Chim)

The former Hero King, reborn in this fat future as a girl. Because she lacks a Ramie, she is enrolled in the squire program.

When Inglis is
invited to a party,
the two hialer
menaces join her
shopping for some
reason...

“It’s
been a
while.”

I heard about
what happened
during the
recent offering
to Highland!
Seems like you
all did a really
good job!

Ripple

Like Eris, a hialer menace
affiliated with the knights.
As one of the few people who are
demihuman, she has ears and a
tail that resemble a dog’s.

Eris

A special type of Artifact known
as a hialer menace. Normally,
she takes on the appearance of
a young woman, but she can
transform into a weapon at will.

Bonus Short Stories

That's a Secret

In the girls' dorm at the knights' academy...

After getting out of the bath, Inglis stood in front of the mirror in the dressing room while toweling herself off. The rush of blood from the warm water gave her skin a faint pink tinge. The swell of her breasts was large, full, and round. She had a tight waistline and long, slender legs.

She really had grown into her body nicely. She liked seeing herself in fashionable clothes, but she also enjoyed looking at herself all over without a single thread in the way.

Front, back, left, right. There was something to see from every angle. A smile drifted to her face. Dressed—or undressed—as she was, she looked alluring.

“Ahh, I'd say this girl looks pretty good.” Inglis still saw herself as her old self, not solely as Inglis Eucus, the girl here. The stunning beauty she saw reflected was both herself and not herself. Thus, she could contemplate her image objectively, without any embarrassment.

Rafinha and Leone had already left the bath, and there was no one in the dressing room but her. She could enjoy watching herself in the mirror for a while.

“Tee hee... Tee hee...”

Inglis could hear laughter coming from somewhere. “Who's there?!” she demanded. Before long, she found Rafinha and Leone in the shadows. “What are you two doing there?”

“Oh, just watching you, Chris. Seeing you keep staring into the mirror like that with a smile on your face, we couldn't help but smile too, you know?” Rafinha said.

Inglis paused in shock before giving them a scolding. “Rani, Leone, that's so vulgar.”

“Don't worry about it! You looked cute! Right, Leone?” Rafinha replied.

“Well, it wasn't my idea, but you looked so happy that I couldn't not watch you, Inglis,” Leone said hesitantly. “When you're alone in front of a mirror, you make oddly different expressions, don't you?”

“That's right! Seeing that, we thought it'd be best to leave you

alone in front of the mirror. You got so absorbed—you weren't paying attention at all to what was going on around you, so it was easy to sneak a peek."

"Really, you should have noticed us sooner," Leone added.

"Right? Usually you're as sharp as a beast when it comes to noticing people," Rafinha noted.

"Ugh..." Inglis moaned. Put that way, it was a bit embarrassing.

"I wish you could look that enthusiastic around Rafael too, just a little bit. I'm sure he'd enjoy it." Rafinha had, for a long time, hoped that Inglis and Rafael could marry.

But no matter how much Inglis adored Rafinha, *that* suggestion was off the table. "This is for myself, not to show other people."

"You've always been like that. That's such a waste. You could be a little more friendly." Rafinha let out an exasperated sigh.

"But Inglis is so cute. I bet people just can't leave her alone," Leone said.

"She's like a magnet! She's been confessed to by the son of another region's lord, almost ravaged by a Highlander, and strangely enough, scouted by a troupe of traveling dancers. They said she could be a worldwide star!" Rafinha recounted.

Each of those events had happened while Inglis and Rafinha were still in their hometown of Ymir.

"Yeah, those all happened," Inglis confirmed.

"That story about a Highlander... Was that when you met my brother Leon?"

"Yeah. You could say he saved us," Inglis said.

"Speaking of which—Chris, if Leon hadn't turned Rahl into a magicite beast then, what were you planning on?" Rafinha asked.

Inglis chuckled. "That's...a secret. ♪" She tried putting on an air of cuteness.

"Whoa! Scary!" Rafinha yelled. "You absolutely were just thinking something scary! You were probably going to murder him, weren't you?!"

"Y-Yeah, don't make that face..." Leone stammered.

After a pause, Inglis sulked and puffed out her cheeks. "Okay, no more of that."

In the Red

In the principal's office of the knights' academy, Miriela sighed deeply as she pored over a ledger. "Ahh... In the red again this week. Ever since this year's class was admitted..."

The reason was obvious: Inglis and Rafinha. They were entitled to use the cafeteria free of charge, but the cost of the extraordinary

amount of food they ate had knocked the academy's already-precarious finances into the red.

The accountant who had brought the ledger gazed at Miriela reproachfully. "Principal, it's because you were so quick to waive their food expenses..."

"Ugh... I don't understand how such cute girls could eat so much? They don't look like they eat a lot."

"Aren't they Sir Rafael's sister and cousin? There was always the danger that their family would have large appetites. The same happened when Sir Rafael was here."

"Eh?! I wasn't even principal then..."

"Well, yes... Anyway, we need to do something about it."

"True, I suppose. What shall we do?"

"You could ask Prince Wayne for a budget increase."

"Well... He already granted significant funds to the academy. I don't want to push it too far. And to make matters worse, the prince is already being told that he's favoring the knights' academy too much."

After a hesitant pause, the accountant said, "To some, they say it's not favoritism of the knights' academy itself, but its principal."

"Why, that's not true at all! The prince just values the importance of developing the next generation to use new technologies for our safety!"

"I...see. Perhaps we could secretly ask Sir Rafael for a donation?"

"That's a good idea...but Rafael is out of the capital on a mission currently."

"Then, what shall we do? We can't go on like this."

"Well..."

"Ah, how about this? We could reduce the amount of food bought for the cafeteria each day. Then at some point, it'll run out of food, keeping the deficit from ballooning endlessly," the accountant suggested.

"I'd kind of feel sorry for them, and I couldn't have them weak during training because of their empty stomachs. Anyway, I'll try to think of something." With that, Principal Miriela ended the conversation and was left alone.

Maybe she could brainstorm over a cup of coffee—no, she had just run out. She had no choice but to head for the cafeteria.

"What should I do? This was a seed I've sown. Perhaps I can make money by getting rid of some of my belongings..." She talked to herself, deep in thought while walking—only to hear lively voices coming from the cafeteria.

"Wow! Amazing as always!"

"I wonder who's gonna win!"

"They eat so much."

“Wh-What’s going on?” Principal Miriela asked.

“Ah, Principal!” Leone said. “They’re having an eating contest!”

In the center of the cafeteria, Inglis and Rafinha were devouring food at an incredible pace.

“Ha ha ha... Ready to give up, Chris?”

“Not yet! Maybe you should, Rani!”

The two emptied plate after plate as they faced off.

“Wh-What are they having a contest over?” Principal Miriela asked.

“Looks like who’s responsible for cleaning their room,” Leone replied.

Miriela had nothing to say to that.

They had no idea what she was going through. The food they were wasting was pushing the academy deeper and deeper into the red, and they had no idea.

“C’mon! Stop that! If you need to compete, find some other way to do it!” she shouted over them.

Inglis and Rafinha flinched in surprise, taken aback by Principal Miriela’s angry glare. “Huh?! W-We apologize!” they both exclaimed.

Local Procurement

That day, intensive Flygear training was taking place on Lake Bolt. Those in both the knight and squire programs were participating in a serious match set up to resemble a real battle.

“All right, time for a break! You’ve got one hour! Now’s the time to refuel! Go get the lunches you’ve brought!” the instructor announced.

And thus, Inglis and the others ate their boxed lunches on the lakeshore. As Leone stared at her friends’ food, she was surprised. “Huh? Inglis, Rafinha, is that all you brought?”

Their lunches were a normal size, the amount of food most girls would eat. Naturally, Leone was suspicious.

They replied together, “Yeah, we don’t have money, so...”

They weren’t at the cafeteria today, so they couldn’t eat for free. They couldn’t buy much on their own.

Before long, Inglis and Rafinha had polished off their meals.

“Are you quite sure that will be enough?” Liselotte asked.

“Not at all. But it’s fine!” Inglis and Rafinha both said.

Leone and Liselotte tilted their heads in confusion.

“We’ll procure stuff locally, so don’t worry about us!” Inglis and Rafinha said together.

Afterward, the two of them went out over the lake in their Flygear, with Inglis in the pilot’s seat. “Rani! Go for it!”

“Okay! Here goes!” Rafinha drew her trusty bow and repeatedly shot thin arrows of light toward the surface of the lake. They fell like driving rain before disappearing below the water’s surface.

“There, there, *there!*”

Shadows floated up from the water and revealed themselves to be fish pierced by the arrows.

“All right! That’s a big catch!♪” Rafinha cheered.

“I’ll gather them. Take the stick!” Inglis leaped down and collected the fish while running across the surface of the water.

“Thanks, Chris. All right, let’s cook these up and eat them!”

“They’re fresh-caught, so they’re sure to be tasty.”

Inglis and Rafinha nodded to each other.

“Well, *that’s...*” Leone said, at a loss.

“I suppose we could call that local procurement,” Liselotte said.

Wide-eyed, the two of them stared at the hungry duo.



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Reborn to Master the Blade: From Hero-King to Extraordinary
Squire ♀ Volume 2
by Hayaken

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Edited by Carly Smith

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